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diaconal learning for conviviality, dignity and justice in Central and Eastern Europe

Seeking Conviviality....

...the art & practice of living together

A new core concept for Diaconia

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CONTENTS

Preface
Conviviality – 'The art and practice of living together' 5
Marks of Conviviality 10
A Convivial and Diaconal Church 15
Convivial Theology 18
Conclusions 21
Select Bibliography 23
Interdiac Founders & Partners 25

PREFACE

interdiac has been on the way since 2008, growing as a learning and living community. Two diaconal social service providers and a University supporter founded interdiac along with a growing number of partner organizations in the Central and Eastern European region. This gradually expanding number of partner organizations and a second University partner play a key role in interdiac development. As the International Academy for Diaconia and Social Action, the interdiac network provides a space and resources for learning, development and research, which is grounded in the regional context and specific concerns of all the partners.

A core element in this development way has been the promotion of joint initiatives which catch the energy of the partners and create a 'sparkle' which then gets its expression in the activities of people in the very diverse living and working environments across the region and beyond.

I remember very well one of these 'sparkling moments'! It was in the process of giving a name to the ideas we wanted to work with and reflecting on them in a light of the analysis of previous actions by members of the network. At the same time these reflections were stimulating our forward look and creating a future vision.

This particular moment was in February 2011 when Tony Addy sharpened up one of our reflection sessions, bringing a bunch of ideas together in this phrase:

'interdiac works for social justice, peace and conviviality'

So, that is how 'conviviality' was born as a diaconal concept and found its family roots in interdiac!

A later keystone in bridging people engaged in community diaconia and churches and diaconal institutions nationally and internationally, was the invitation of Lutheran World Federation (LWF) to join them in developing a process, which would focus community diaconia in Europe and work towards the reformation anniversary in 2017. The first consultation meeting with the then LWF Europe secretary Dr. Eva Vogel-Mfato took place in February 2011 in Geneva. The concept of the process, 'Seeking conviviality, re-forming community diakonia in Europe' towards the 500th Reformation Anniversary (2017) was introduced as an integrating theme and it was agreed that interdiac would be the partner of LWF for the process.

interdiac has been and still is on the way to develop and grow in order to make a change in people´s lives, communities and societies and to strengthen diaconia to support needed changes.

This booklet, which introduces the concept of conviviality, is your invitation to join a journey to discover the essence of conviviality and at the same time it is an invitation to join the movement seeking conviviality across the world.

Janka Adameová

Director, interdiac

1.
CONVIVIALITY – ‘THE ART AND PRACTICE OF LIVING TOGETHER’

In the work of interdiac we have developed a participatory approach both to the development of our self-understanding and the definition of our aims as well as to learning and practice. This requires time to listen to each other across the very different borders that so easily divide people in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. Of course divisions often easily crop up between people in other regions, but the particular shared background in the formerly centrally planned economies still creates some specific issues and reflects some commonalities.

During one such discussion, the topic of multicultural living came up. We recognised that the background to this concept was the different national and regional experiences, particularly of Western Europe, but also the United States. At the same time our colleagues wanted to discuss the fact that communities in many Eastern European countries had been living with diversity for generations. That is not to say that there were no problems – on the contrary. Regularly coming to the top of the agenda was the presence of Roma minorities in many countries and also the fact that the present borders of Europe cut different minorities off from adjoining states where they are a majority. Furthermore, inside national territories, religion seems to play a role in resurgent national identities, which creates difficulties for some in everyday life. This gives added salience and urgency to ecumenical and inter-faith working. On top of this, previous and present migrations and refugee flows also present challenges. For sure there is something to learn from the 'Western' experience - but maybe there is a need across Europe to find a new way to conceive of living together.

I already alluded to the question of 'borders' and in interdiac we had frequent discussions about how to live in a region where many borders are contested and where they often relate to former conflicts and former regional powers. There are many examples of this and we began to see how, in a certain sense the different borders also run through each of us. On top of this, within the region, because there are so many contested borders, a large number of countries have experienced - and some continue to experience - civil conflict and war. The question of identity and place become extremely important in this case and religion also takes on a different level of meaning. On the table therefore, was the need to find a language and practice to handle this issue, which was freshly developed and not simply borrowed from another present day context.

At the same time, our interdiac members had decided that one key focus of interdiac work would be on strengthening local diaconia – the diaconia of the local church, diaconal congregations and organizations. The natural phrase to sum this up would be to 'take a community development approach'. In the interdiac degree programme and other projects, we are working with both community development and social work related understandings of practice. But the word community also creates problems, which become even more transparent when working with churches that are part of a minority community or with churches whose identity is closely tied with a particular nation state.

In all these discussions, there was another dimension which seemed to be important and that is the assumption often made, that each person and community has a fixed identity. This understanding is a barrier

to working with diverse and diversifying societies. A community defines boundaries of inclusion and exclusion – the word carries descriptive, sociological connotations but it also has a normative dimension. If we talk about community development, which community or what kind of community do we want to develop? And what is the role of the church community in the wider community or society – as well as what is the church's approach to other communities and associations. The question of 'boundaries' once again comes to the fore!

We were searching for a concept that would be open to the experience of living with diversity and which would not close off the church from the wider society; on the contrary it should open the church for shared life. Dialogue and the building of trustful relationships were seen to be keys. Identity is not fixed and community is not immutable.

The second set of questions we have to grapple with are to do with the fact that among the interdiac members, many different national and regional economic positions and contexts are represented. Some countries and some regions of countries have quite strong economies but many are suffering from economic collapse to the extent that both industrial and agricultural work has all but disappeared. On top of this we have very different models of welfare, which have been built (or not) on previous models from the 'communist' times plus memories of welfare and diaconia from 'pre-communist' times.

The question of participation in economic life was on the agenda and especially the question of the role of the church and diaconia in issues of work, economy and the environment. One lens, which we used to view this, was the question of 'justice' – especially economic justice. Another is civil society and local organization, which also has a problematic history, since autonomous initiative and self-organization was mostly not permitted in the former system and civil society has had a patchy development over the past 25 years.

It was in the middle of these wide-ranging discussions that I thought of the word 'conviviality' to summarize what we were searching for, coming from our different corners. The main questions seemed to be, 'How can we live together?' ('con vivere'), 'What kind of economic and social policy supports living together?' and 'How can diaconia contribute to people living a good life together?' The word 'conviviality' derives from the Spanish word 'convivencia' and relates to the experience when Moslems, Catholics and Jews lived together in relative peace on the Iberian Peninsula. Conviviality is therefore an inherently relational concept, which also emphasizes 'being' rather than 'having'.

The more recent use of the word was by Ivan Illich in an oft-quoted book, 'Tools for Conviviality'. Illich was a Croatian-Austrian with Jewish and Catholic parents, who became priest of an immigrant parish in New York. Eventually he moved to Puerto Rica where he founded a training and research institute. The aim was to train people from the global north going to work in Latin America to work with sensitivity and not to

impose their values. He used the word conviviality to mean the autonomous and creative relationship between people, people and their environment and with technology. He considered conviviality to be freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value (Illich, 1973).

In interdiac, we decided to use this word as a heuristic concept. We created the phrase:

'Seeking Conviviality – the art and practice of living together'

The phrase focuses on 'practice'. It provokes the questions:

- **'What are the everyday actions and behaviors and the related values and attitudes which support conviviality?'**
- **'Where do we find these practices in our local context?'**
- **'What kind of economic and social policies support living together?'**

It invites us to reflect on our everyday life in terms of openness and relatedness. But it also invites a reflection on professional practice and the way in which professionals, be they social workers, pastoral workers or others working in relation to people to reflect on how their own 'service model' and their own organization or church is also seeking conviviality. Furthermore it has implications for the structures of the economy and society and for politicians and those involved in decisions about work and economy.

Using the word 'art' emphasizes that conviviality is built on creativity and imagination and like any art, seeking conviviality or living in conviviality is based on and may reinforce personal values, vocation and the development of skills, through informal and formal learning. It puts emphasis on the creative and intuitive capacity among 'ordinary people' and recognizes their primary contribution to convivial living together.

There were several further advantages to using this word and the related phrase:

First, it relates primarily to everyday life and to concrete relationships and this is a hopeful perspective amidst many disturbing realities. Seeking conviviality is not first and foremost a professional activity nor is it restricted to the work of pastoral workers or diaconal social workers. It relates to everyday living. Furthermore, by emphasizing the 'life world' or rather the 'life worlds' of people it points to those everyday practices that support living together. Seeking Conviviality can be related to professional practice where the form of professional practice is informed by closeness to the various 'life worlds' present in any context. From a diaconal perspective, of course we prioritize the people and groups who are vulnerable and excluded.

Secondly, by using it we do not have to enter into the discussion of difference through the problematic words multiculturalism and integration.

Thirdly, it provokes a reflection on the ways in which the church and faith communities relate to the wider society in which they are set.

Fourthly it encourages a reflection on and response to changes in the present economic and political priorities, in terms of an examination of what supports convivial life together and what obstructs living together or what provokes and supports divisive behavior amongst people in different local contexts.

Finally, especially from the regional perspective it encourages reflection on the impact of the previous experience of forced living together and even forced displacement on the art and practice of living together.

Seeking conviviality is the shorthand for the search for a new way of living together that addresses:

- **The challenge of growing diversity** in local communities and cities. How can people live together without conformity and without brutalizing each other?
- **The need to support the creation of new forms of economic life and work which are not simply based on GDP growth** and to underpin this with a different relation to creation (or the environment and natural resources to be more prosaic about it). This requires some severe controls over minimum and maximum income and over the ability to amass unimaginable wealth, often at the expense of the 'commons'.
- **The need to create a new political culture**, which will engage people as subjects rather than as consumers of political party programmes or worse, as cheerleaders for populist leaders.

It is important to recognize the interlinking of these themes and the ways in which work on each supports the others. Through sharing our own motivation and engagement in all its richness and diversity we are able to learn from each other. Some stereotypical views are broken down. Some ideas are given up and new ideas shared. Seeking conviviality is an interactive process by which we are enabled to go beyond our borders and differences. With empathy, we begin to find the basis for common action. In this way it is closely linked to the pedagogical approach of the interdiac learning process.

2.
MARKS OF CONVIVIALITY

VOCATION

Diaconia is a faithful response to God's call through the other

The diaconal church has a double call – a call from God and a call from people who are suffering, those who are 'the least' amongst us, those with no voice, whom the powerful do not hear. Just as Christians are called to serve God they are also called to serve their neighbor. The 'Good Samaritan' story is often cited as one of the mainsprings of diaconia and if you look closely, you can see that the 'call' to service comes from the wounded man by the wayside. One cannot disagree with that, but what are the content, model and method of appropriate diaconal service in the present context? What happens if we begin to create a model for this service from the idea that the diaconal call comes from those outside the church, from those whose voice does not register among the political and economic decision makers, those who do not even figure as successful consumers? Maybe the people in need are those who express God's call to us. The other striking and unexpected aspect of this story is that the one who responded to the call was not from the mainstream religious or cultural tradition. The representatives of this tradition couldn't hear the call! We could also reflect on what this implies for our diaconal engagement!

In reality, the motivation to become involved in diaconia comes from relationships and experiences and therefore it is very important in developing and strengthening diaconal vocation to pay attention to the biographical dynamic which underpins and resources commitment. This is important whether the person is a volunteer, an activist or is employed in diaconal service. The deep personal understanding of service springs from these experiences and develops in reflection on unfolding practice.

JUSTICE

Diaconia Challenges Injustice

A key role of diaconia is to focus on people and communities who suffer from injustice and exploitation. This work is grounded on direct engagement with people who are marginalized, for example people who are out of paid employment or who are under-employed or who otherwise suffer from bad working conditions. Other important justice issues which diaconia has to address include the rights of immigrant and minority groups, people with disabilities and especially the rights of people who are not legally recognised as citizens or denizens.

In general terms the focus of diaconia on justice issues follows three main lines:

The first stems from the focus on people who are marginalized or who are in some way disadvantaged. Based on the understanding that all are made in the image of God and are valued equally regardless of their status, class or abilities and therefore cannot be denied the basics for a life in dignity, diaconia has to work directly with those who are marginalized in order to address their needs. But meeting needs has to be done in a way that enhances the dignity of all the people involved and which enables them to participate in addressing the issues that affect them. For example, it is not only a question of food but of how food is shared and how the context of sharing food promotes conviviality, which includes common action.

The second main line stems from this. Social justice is also about participation. Meeting basic needs is fundamental, but it is also important to enable all people to participate in political, economic and cultural life. The problem is that financially and resource poor people also lack time and resources for civil participation. A functioning democracy involves wide participation in the institutions and processes, which affect everyday life.

The third main line is to press for the implementation of political and economic policies which ensure that the resources of society serve the common good of all. This means that economic and political powers also should be responsible for the wellbeing of all and for the care of creation. It has been remarked that we not only need to meet the immediate needs of people but also to work for a society and economy that does not produce poverty (interdiac, 2010).

DIGNITY

Diaconia Supports Human Dignity

It was already in the 1970's that churches in Western Europe began to register the growth of a consumer society, which was strongly shaping personal and community life. The expectations of ever-rising consumption and the growing market in new technology - especially communication technology - have had a profound effect on employment and social relations. This development also had an impact on Central and Eastern Europe. The breakdown of the former centrally planned economies opened the whole European space to these consumer pressures. In this process, the combination of consumer values and the pressure of financial markets have contributed to the splitting of society, especially between a smaller group of very affluent people, and a growing number living in poverty across the region. This continual growth of inequality is antithetical to the promotion of the common good of all. Previous generations had experienced shortages of even the most basic goods and services and lack of resources to meet basic needs. These conditions have now returned to some regions and for some groups in Eastern Europe. Critical new factors are the drive to keep consumption led demand growing (not relating this to basic needs) and the perceived priority of restoring the finance system. This means official efforts to deal with the economic situation may create more poverty and do not address basic needs.

The formation of a consumer society has an impact on people's self-understanding because it is based based on the ever increasing stimulation of people's desires, which are actually endless, in comparison with finite basic needs. In consumer driven economies and societies, personal identity and fulfillment are linked to the consumption of certain goods and services. This in turn creates a view of fulfillment and 'the good life' which is based on insatiable desires and compulsive product innovation. A society based on rampant consumerism leads to stress, unsustainable personal and household debt and reduces the time available for relationships and reflection. The emphasis in the Christian teaching on greed as a fundamental sin is related to the fact that desire is without limit and this limitless consumption, which is now celebrated, has led to the growing poverty of people and communities. The implication of this is that the present economy and the underlying economic model is an important focus for the engagement of the church and especially for diaconia.

We headed this section with the one word 'dignity' and by this we would like to explore the link between dignity and welfare. This is also relevant, because in many discussions of poverty, one of the links made is between poverty and human dignity. It is taken for granted that everyone should be treated with dignity, but dignity is rarely defined in policy or operational terms.

Nowadays, dignity tends to be discussed on the basis of an individualistic view of the person and focuses on autonomous decision-making and a person's responsibility for their own social and economic welfare. In Christian terms dignity is a more relational concept. Whilst not denying that people are responsible and should be able to make choices in life, the Christian concept of dignity recognises the interpersonal grounding of decision making. Furthermore, dignity in Christian terms is based on the fact that the person is created in the image of God and the love of God extends to all. This implies that systems should not damage the dignity of people, whether they are systems of care or of employment or financial systems. The

focus of the diaconal understanding of the person is on relationships and creation care. The putting of markets (especially financial markets and markets which speculate on commodities which are basic needs, such as food) ahead of human need is a form of idolatry that undermines dignity and should be exposed for what it is.

Centring our understanding on dignity means that each human being, as created in the image of God, presents the same ethical demand as any other. The fact that this is not so, calls for a committed response from diaconia and the churches both on the practical level, with the people who are losing out and on the political level, to change the priorities. It has implications for the quality of diaconal and social service and for public policy. Diaconia cannot rest content with the role of simply supporting the growing numbers of people with diminishing resources.

3.
A CONVIVIAL AND DIACONAL CHURCH

Choosing conviviality as the core concept through which we are developing diaconal thinking and strategy builds on the importance of encouraging relationships in the congregation and with wider society, as a springboard for diaconal action. It already brings in ideas that are critical of the dominant individualistic view of the person and emphasises the importance of empathy and relationships. As the 'art and practice of living together', conviviality provides an approach to diaconia grounded in everyday life. This should also affect the liturgy, opening it to concerns of and participation by marginalised people and groups, where this is appropriate. The emphasis on 'living together' implies a change of service model towards activities which are reciprocal and where all are 'givers and receivers' at different moments. It implies a 'horizontal' rather than 'top-down' model of communication where all can contribute ideas and practical action according to their possibilities, skills and strengths.

If community diaconia is going to meet the challenges of the new context it will need to be based on working approaches that build in participation and empowerment from the start. This means community diaconia is grounded in a long-term process rather than short-term projects. It is based on building relationships with people. Therefore diaconia in local communities needs creative people and a readiness to begin to act without having all the structures clearly in place. The reason is that the basis of local diaconal work is an inductive approach that does not start with preconceptions of the definition of the problem or the solution. It is clear that the development of community based diaconia that is empowering and transformative needs to be grounded in a leadership model that combines the ability to take initiative with an ability to listen to and reflect with people. On each step of the way, care has to be taken not to 'leave the people behind'!

The understanding of diaconia approached through the concept of conviviality supports the concept of diaconal church or the creation of open church meeting points. It starts with 'presence in the everyday life-world' of people. Very often the role of a volunteer in diaconal work is clear because a person with resources, maybe of time, is involved in supporting another person or an activity. But in neighbourhood-based activity, the volunteer may also be someone who is in the same situation as the group or person who needs help. The whole group may become active in working for change and in this situation the distinction between the traditional volunteer role and that of an activist working for change is blurred. People may be in different roles at different times because the activities are rooted in everyday life and voluntary workers may take on many different roles. On the basis of the work of such local diaconal centres, or engaged local churches the connection between mutual aid and social or political action is easier to make because of the trust relations that are built up over time. Critical roles for diaconal workers include community building and making connections between different groups and interests. There is also a strong emphasis on networking and bridging with other institutions and organisations in the field and this perspective on diaconia is supportive of ecumenical and interfaith working. However, as we have noticed, diaconia has a special concern with marginalised groups and it is important not only to focus on relationships in the locality where relationships with people are the direct concern. The vocation of diaconia is also to secure justice and participation with excluded groups.

It is important to create diaconal service models where the members of different groups, for example those with a migrant background, can develop their own activities in relation with each other and those who are the traditional residents. In some cases such church based initiatives are the only source for many services which are denied to some groups of people and also provide a focal point where the skills and expertise of different groups can be enhanced and shared.

Working out the idea of conviviality extends diaconia from the making and sharing of food to the sharing of culture and to the development of local economic activities using people's skills and interest. It can lead to innovation and it can also lead to action to influence or change political decisions at local or wider levels. However to build on conviviality also demands reflection on the use of time, because it cannot be constrained within 'office hours' and it requires an open and affirming inductive attitude. It is very different to the normal 'service delivery' model that dominates traditional diaconal thinking. The whole congregation can be a diaconal actor in the expression of its life together.

Diaconal thinking can even influence the way the church building is organised. Buildings should give expression to this open, welcoming attitude. Buildings convey 'messages' of inclusion or exclusion and the arrangement of rooms and furniture also convey the values and preferences of the congregation. It is not a question only or mainly of finance, as some very well furnished buildings can be intimidating and excluding because the official infrastructure of the churches often reminds people of official buildings, which often do not provide a very empowering atmosphere. On the other hand, sometimes congregations with few resources are able to create warm and welcoming spaces in their buildings.

4.
CONVIVIAL THEOLOGY

When we begin theological reflection on the concept of conviviality, we move firmly away from the concept of working for other people, or of the church for others, to working *with* other people and the church *with* others. We move away from simply well meaning actions for other needy people towards sharing life, based on empathy, reciprocity and presence. There is a clear link here with the thinking of Paulo Freire, in that the diaconal conviviality stresses the understanding that we are all co-learners. This approach emphasises that we work with others, not that they become like 'us' but that we learn together how to change. Seeking Conviviality implies that openness to the 'other' is a condition for our faithful Christian living as persons or as congregations. The people of God are those who can work with others without wanting to dominate or fight them. Part of the faithful logic behind this is grounded in the understanding that in encountering the other we encounter Christ and in that sense we need the other for our own identity and faithful living.

We can also notice that in the early church and throughout Christian history, there is a recurring emphasis on the people of God as a pilgrim people who have no abiding city or nation on earth. We can reflect on the experience of the people of Israel in exile who are called through the prophet Jeremiah to seek the welfare of the city in which they are exiled. The early church was mainly an urban phenomenon but when the Christians gathered, they called themselves an 'ekklesia', which implies that they did not see themselves as the 'polis' or an alternative to the powers of the day but were rather an assembly of people. They were also known as those who were active to care for the poor and those who were excluded from the care of the household or polis. The ekklesia had a double role. First of all it should respond to the problems especially of 'the poor' and in action make it clear that there is hope for all, that all should be included across divisions of identity. Secondly the ekklesia should make it clear that this is a task of the whole society, so that people included in the polis across divisions of identity and class. This leads us to the role of the church today, exemplifying in its own life the conviviality which is missing in the wider society and being open to those on the margins, including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

As the church developed, the tradition of hospitality towards travellers and strangers (migrants) grew up and whilst the understanding of conviviality builds on the early church and monastic traditions of hospitality, it goes further in a number of aspects. Hospitality has a prominent role in the biblical tradition, according to which the guests or strangers should be treated even better than our own people or family members. The concept has offered roots for understanding the way we treat other people well. A hospitable attitude may be a precursor to conviviality – but it still implies that the one offering hospitality defines the terms of the relationship. If one is a guest one is expected to leave and if one stays and becomes a member of the community, hospitality in its original meaning ends!

Conviviality is based on the recognition that every community is diverse in one way or other and living together must be based on respect for difference and also on developing the 'art and practice of living together'. Toleration is not enough; mutual respect is the necessary basis when we live everyday life

together. The question of the depth of relationship becomes important because people usually cultivate strong relationships with those most like themselves. They may tolerate others but it goes no further. Seeking conviviality works when people develop those relationships where they can profoundly learn from each other and also share the deeper aspects of identity including spirituality. When every day is shared with others, it is possible to learn from each other. If people are able to expose their identity to other identities, they are able to build mutual relationship with other people different from them. This leads to trust and to an ability to appreciate the resources and strengths which people bring to common life and common projects.

In the light of these considerations we can recognise that if we want to create a diaconal church, we have first of all to look inside the congregational life and discover how far we share the characteristics of conviviality already. Diaconal conviviality should be a mark of our church life and then it will naturally lead 'outwards'. These characteristics reflect the way in which the church as the body of Christ is seeking to be 'in the midst of people' as Jesus was, especially people suffering from injustice, marginalisation or worse, as well as with those who are sick or in prison. Diaconal conviviality cannot be expressed simply in a project because it exists as a way to be in relation, to be present. It is not a way to collect prestige or power, or to raise the profile of the church but to be connected to the 'life world' of people. This model of being present and related, leads to a valuing of everyone's contribution and can also be a contribution also to sustainable community. As such it calls into question the standard developmental project models and offers a fresh way forward in a time of political and economic uncertainty

The church is the body of Christ and it exemplifies conviviality in the Eucharistic symbolism of a shared meal, which takes everyday products and transforms them into a means to demonstrate the realm or rule of God in action. In the Eucharist we express gratitude for the food and drink we have to share – and implicitly for the work of those who produced it. But we also share equally, which is a powerful symbol contrary to the usual pattern sharing of resources in everyday life. It is not surprising that the Eucharist is the central act of the Christian liturgy because it makes visible our conviviality with each other and with God in Christ. We recognise that God is present in the world and active with all people and we are invited through the Eucharist to share in the 'liturgy after the liturgy' in which we re-enact the symbolism concretely, in compassion for the other. We are not Christ, but when we want to be Christians, the body of Christ, we must share his compassion for others in their suffering because of oppression, injustice or poverty, because of illness, disease or living with a disability. This is an expression of conviviality, living with people in their situation and working for fullness of life. Living in conviviality empowers people to work for change in the direction of the realm or rule of God. Compassion has social and political outworking as together we try to remove the causes of suffering. Diaconia seeking conviviality works to change structures locally and beyond in order to support its realisation.

5.
CONCLUSION

Seeking conviviality is not a project, it informs congregational life and diaconia. It is at the same time related to a vision of living together in solidarity and of a just and participatory society. Furthermore it calls for a critique of the prevailing social and economic order. Furthermore, it offers a qualified means for working towards that vision in the life and diaconal work of the churches. In everyday practice we can glimpse what a convivial church and society might mean. Since we started to think about this new concept for diaconia the situation in Europe has once again changed. The issues that were at the forefront have not disappeared but new challenges to welcome uprooted people face the churches and societies of Central and Eastern Europe, as other regions. Populist politics is leading to a harsher climate which is more hostile to minorities and excluded groups. Therefore conviviality, which embodies empathy, participation, mutuality and solidarity, is needed more than ever. Churches are called to live with people in these changing times with hope and to work together for change. This is needed whilst at the same time being combined with actions that are needed simply to enable people to survive. The call comes from God and through people who are suffering.

Change comes when the diaconal church and the diaconal worker builds bridges to local diverse communities, including faith communities and with people in different life situations. But it depends on how the bridges are built and whether they reflect a spirit of mutual learning and respect. The church can remain at the level of service provision and friendly conversations but to seek conviviality transforms even basic actions, such as eating together, into an opportunity for deeper reciprocal sharing. This builds trust and conviviality, which in turn can lead to action for innovation or change. The church itself becomes a learning community and offers the space for learning and change with other people and our faith and life are enriched through this experience.

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...interdiac members were searching for a concept that would be open to the experience of living with diversity and which would not close the church off from the wider society; on the contrary it should open the church for shared life. Dialogue and the building of trustful relationships were seen to be keys...

...the word 'conviviality' summarizes what we were searching for, the main questions seemed to be, 'How can we live together?' ('con vivere'), 'How can diaconia contribute to people living a good life together?' and 'What kind of economic and social policy supports living together?'

This book describes the background to this new concept and invites you to join the journey to discover the essence of conviviality in practice and reflection; at the same time it is an invitation to join the movement seeking conviviality across the world.

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