Approved by the Board of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission on 10 April 2025

POLICY ON DIAKONIA

Diakonia is a fundamental feature of the identity and core of the Church and an essential part of the comprehensive mission work of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (Felm). Diakonia is a service of love carried out by the Church and a testimony (diakonia–martyria) to the presence of Jesus Christ in this world. Diakonia embodies a part of the Church's missionary role. In fact, diakonia and mission work are entwined in the duties of the Church. Therefore, Felm serves as a witness of Christ through both actions and words.

Diaconal work stems from the idea of loving one's neighbour, and it is a way of life and a shared duty of all Christians. Diakonia calls everyone to take part in the work toward promoting human dignity and justice, thereby serving those around us. The goal of diakonia is to bring about a comprehensive change for the better in an individual's life. The Church as a diaconal entity supports individuals facing a vulnerable situation in their life on their own terms. It promotes justice, equality, peace, and caring communities, and protects God's creation. Diakonia does not impose terms and conditions but collaborates with other operators for the common good. In cooperation with partner churches, Felm is involved in implementing diaconal initiatives and supporting the diaconal ownership of the churches by enhancing their operational capacity. Diakonia is an inalienable task of the Church and a testimony to the world. It characterises and shapes the life of the Church.

1. Purpose and objectives of the policy

The policy on diakonia outlines and defines Felm's understanding of diakonia and the key principles guiding the work. It describes the objectives and operating methods of Felm's diakonia as part of the overall missionary efforts we carry out with our partners. Our policies guide all our work, and they inform our stakeholders of our position, recommendations, and approaches in the specific focus areas of our work.

2. Theological foundation and principles

Diakonia is based on an understanding of the Triune God: The Father as the Creator, the Son, Jesus Christ, as the Atoner and Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit as the provider and maintainer of life. This Holy Trinity lays the foundation for the Church's diakonia and for the call to implement and be part of God's mission in this world.

God is present amid weakness and suffering. The role of Jesus as a teacher, witness and servant on Earth deepens our understanding of the theology behind diakonia. The actions of Jesus revealed God's will and strong presence in this world and the essence of God the Father as an ever-renewing source of hope. Jesus manifested this by walking alongside people and displaying particular discretion when encountering those who were suffering or excluded from the society. Jesus worked in a public and comprehensive manner, responding to a wide range of suffering and injustice. His actions stemmed from the question "what do you need me to do to you", and he gave people back their basic dignity and a sense of agency in their own life. At the same time, Jesus criticised the current regime and oppressive structures. He also gave his followers the duty of love for one's neighbour, reconciliation, and justice (e.g. Matt. 5–7).

The Greek word *diakonia* is often translated into "service", such as support offered to the most vulnerable. The Church's diaconal essence is based on the Bible, which states that all of humankind is made in the image of God. Consequently, each human has an inalienable human dignity. At their core, all of Jesus' actions were based on an overall perception of the human condition, a will to promote a better future, and determination to condemn the prevailing discriminatory structures. When the first churches were established, people were specifically tasked with diaconal work. In addition, Jesus gave each Christian a diaconal mission by issuing the order to love one's neighbour, making diakonia a key part of discipleship and Christian identity. Diakonia is rooted within the Christian faith and nourished by the Holy Communion. The body of Christ is sacramental and sacrificed, a symbol of sharing a contact and of the tasks assigned to humanity. Every baptised Christian serves as a messenger of God in this world.

As a missionary organisation of the *Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland*, Felm's view of diakonia is consistent with the diaconal concept adopted by the Church. According to this shared view, the Church as a diaconal entity supports those in a vulnerable position and promotes justice, equality and peace. The Church as a diaconal entity is a community that promotes a good life and care for the entire creation. Church legislation underlines that diaconal services should primarily be targeted at individuals with the greatest need, who cannot receive help elsewhere. Diakonia is based on the mercy of God, the love of Christ, and the example set by Jesus. According to the Lutheran view, diakonia is part of the heart and identity of the Church, thus characterising the entire life of the Church. It is not something the Church *does*, but rather something the Church *is* by nature. Felm is one of the Church's channels of international diakonia. Due to the deeply rooted, strong diaconal identity of the Church, diakonia is also one of the focus areas in Felm's operational strategy.

For Felm, diakonia is an umbrella concept that describes the idea of serving one's neighbours. Churches and Christian organisations work comprehensively to support people living in difficult and vulnerable environments and their communities. Diakonia is carried out using different tools. These include, among others, the diaconal services and projects of churches and Christian organisations, but also efforts such as development cooperation, humanitarian aid, and attempts to influence the root causes of problems. This work is characterised by the implementation of the principles and good practices of diakonia, development cooperation and humanitarian aid. Moreover, the work is also characterised by a specific form of "bilingualism". This means that the diaconal services of churches and Christian actors are described from the perspective of spiritual motivation, whereas the development cooperation and humanitarian aid efforts implemented on the terms of the secular society are described based on the related principles and traditions.

3. Operating environment

3.1 Operating environment of diakonia

The Church operates in the midst of global uncertainties. The COVID-19 pandemic, increasing wars and conflicts, economic uncertainty and social unrest have had a significant impact on societies. Tensions are growing in international politics. Democracy has declined, autocracy has gained ground, and the human rights situation has deteriorated globally. The climate crisis and long-term conflicts increase poverty, inequality, and the number of refugees. Especially in the Middle East, the emigration of Christians from many areas is a source of great concern. At the same time, the global Christian Church is growing, particularly in Africa, Asia and South America. In contrast, in Europe and the United States an increasing number of people are becoming alienated from church and institutional religion. The global church operates in the midst of these rapid changes.

Most of Felm's partner churches belong to the Lutheran church family. To understand the diaconal challenges

faced by these churches, we need more than an analysis of the current political, social, economic and religious situation. We also need to analyse their history. The Christian mission work came to the global South hand in hand with colonialism, and the development of diakonia was based on the same foundation. Consequently, diaconal work took a form similar to European diakonia, which at present is poorly suited to match the way our partner churches think and operate. In many churches, it is a deeply rooted idea that diaconal activities are funded from outside and that the members of the church are primarily beneficiaries of diaconal support, not active actors in the actual diakonia. In recent decades, missionary organisations have significantly reduced the amount of financial support they distribute and justified their actions by the increasing independence of partner churches. In turn, the partner churches have been left to cope with the situation, forced to adjust their diakonia according to their own resources and local operating methods.

Due to the lack of external funding, some churches have been forced to give up large diaconal projects. However, the need for diakonia has still been obvious. As the economic capacity of churches to respond to these challenges decreases, it is time to focus on the future and look for contextual ways of implementing diakonia. This means, for example, strengthening the diaconal mindset of parish members and supporting their diaconal work. Peer learning is a great way to strengthen the idea of a mutual calling and to support everyday diakonia. Moreover, the opportunities offered by technology and the media should also be taken into account. Websites, mobile applications and chat services can serve as tools which those in a vulnerable position can use to seek help, get support, or participate in diaconal events and activities. Taking part in remote counselling, online training, virtual meetings, and peer group gatherings is not dependent on the physical location. Furthermore, the diaconal thinking of church leaders and decision-makers should also be strengthened. Without their support, there will be no development in the churches' diakonia. Through these measures, Felm contributes to strengthening the diaconal skills of partner churches and helps them claim ownership over their own diakonia.

3.2 Ecumenical diakonia

Felm's key international partners are the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and ACT Alliance. WCC and ACT Alliance have jointly produced the document *Called to Transformation – Ecumenical Diakonia (2022)*. Its purpose is to develop a common understanding of ecumenical diakonia, which promotes dialogue and collaboration between churches and Christian diaconal operators such as organisations. Among other things, the document encourages a common discussion on the themes of power and reciprocity. It outlines the theology behind diakonia and provides practical content for the work, thereby promoting the establishment of ecumenical diakonia and strengthening the institutional capacity of churches.

As a member of the ecumenical movement, Felm finds the document *Called to Transformation - Ecumenical Diakonia* of great importance. It lays the foundation for discussion on diaconal issues both within the organisation and with partners. This document is a source of immense support for churches and Christian organisations that strive to redefine what diakonia means in their own context. Moreover, it also inspires more active diaconal cooperation within the ecumenical movement.

4. Key policies

4.1 Diakonia modifies structures and strengthens individuals

The purpose of diakonia is not only to provide temporary support, but also to promote a profound change in

individuals, churches, communities and society alike. Instead of merely treating the symptoms, diaconal efforts strive to eliminate the actual causes of problems. Its aim is to actively make the world a more just place for everyone. Diakonia encourages people to dive into the very core of their issues by challenging injustice and supporting individuals in finding their own resources. Socio-psychological diakonia aims to build connections between an individual's inner world and their surroundings, allowing constructive relationships between groups to grow as a result of behavioural changes. Transformative diakonia strives to change the society so that everyone will have the same opportunities. It is a tangible way to make a difference in the world, strengthen our faith, establish new connections, and develop ourselves to ultimately achieve a comprehensive change for the better.

4.2 Diakonia is based on faith and human rights

The foundation of diakonia is built on both faith and a legal framework. From a theological point of view, both concepts are part of the unique identity of diakonia and, thus, reinforce each other. The role, objectives and methods of diakonia are all based on faith and justice.

The faith-centred ideology refers to the Christian view in which all people have been created in the image of God. We live in a symbiosis with God, each other and creation. God's love for his entire creation and the example given by Jesus through his teaching and actions motivate diaconal operators to respond to a vast variety of religious, spiritual, human and societal challenges. The faith-based approach involves a willingness to tell people about the Gospel in order to spark faith and help them grow in the image of God. The key is to encounter others in a comprehensive, respectful manner, be present, and share with them the ups and downs of life. Diakonia conveys the message of the Gospel in a practical way and highlights the presence of Christ in the world even when the Gospel is not directly mentioned. Human dignity, peace and justice are realised wherever Christians embody their faith in everyday life.

The legal framework refers to *human rights* and their central role in the formation of a just society. This means that people within the scope of diaconal activities are themselves active actors, or right holders. Promoting their own agency in a manner that respects human dignity is a key priority. By complying with the principles of justice, Felm undertakes to follow the internationally agreed human rights standards and norms. Moreover, we also comply with the principles of participation, inclusion, non-discrimination, equality and responsibility. Due to this commitment to human rights, advocacy is always an integral part of diakonia. Diakonia seeks out ways to encourage individuals to defend their rights. As active citizens, they are also motivated to promote good governance, social protection and well-being for all. Diakonia strives to give marginalised groups a chance to be heard. Diakonia engages in solidarity with these individuals and speaks on their behalf if they are unable to do so themselves. From a theological point of view, therefore, diakonia is not merely giving, but also highlighting and changing the centralisation of power and wealth caused by poverty.

4.3 Diakonia is for everyone – unconditionally

All Felm's activities are inclusive. This means taking into account the needs of all people and ensuring their inclusion in fragile operating environments. Vulnerable groups of people are particularly prone to discrimination. Therefore, the aim of inclusivity is to promote equality and combat discrimination. This ensures that everyone has the opportunity to participate in the development of their communities as well as the society as full members, and to benefit from the results of the development work. Inclusivity is manifested in promoting equality, accessibility, non-discrimination and appreciation of diversity.

The Christian faith confirms the command to love one's neighbour unconditionally. Diakonia belongs to everyone, and no-one is denied of diaconal services based on their sex, sexual orientation, disability, social class, geographic location, religion, ethnicity, origin or any other characteristic. As an integral part of the Church's duties, diakonia in itself is meaningful. When Jesus healed and cared for people, he did it unconditionally. He did not demand that the people he helped should become disciples. His care and healing powers were proof of God's absolute and unconditional love. In the same way, diaconal work must be unconditional, and it shall not be limited to any political or religious agenda, neither open nor hidden. When working with people in a vulnerable position, there is a particular risk of power abuse – particularly regarding religious power. Diaconal workers must take this risk into consideration and protect the dignity and integrity of the people with whom they work. Faith-based organisations often encounter suspicions in areas where the population does not share their faith. Although the purpose of diaconal support work is not to get individuals to change their religious conviction, it is important to be open about the motivation behind the work. Diaconal activities must be transparent. If necessary, diaconal workers shall openly describe the faith-based foundation of their actions.

4.4 Diakonia stands for justice and non-discrimination

The prophets of the Old Testament strongly criticised systematic injustice and the way in which the current leaders abused their power. They were determined to make a difference in rectifying the shortcomings. Jesus also defended the dignity and rights of those in a vulnerable position. He proclaimed the kingdom of God, characterised by justice and peace. Diakonia is a part of this tradition. Diakonia strives to highlight the reasons why human rights are not implemented and why inequality is constantly increasing. For this reason, diakonia promotes the advocacy of the people receiving diaconal services. The goal is to achieve a permanent change for the better. We talk about prophetic diakonia and advocacy.

4.5 Diakonia emerges in collaboration to support communities

All human beings have been created in the image of God, and they have the ability to engage in loving care and promoting justice. In diaconal work, it makes sense to cooperate with others for the common good, and to promote networking by strengthening extensive interaction between different operators. Instead of working alone, diakonia is built on an individual-community-society structure which ensures that a positive change is possible. A key feature in Felm's diaconal work is the ability to work professionally with groups representing different religions, world views and ways of thinking. As global conflicts increase, practical dialogue ("diapraxis") is becoming an increasingly valuable tool. Providing people from different religious backgrounds with a safe space may contribute to reducing mutual suspicions and serve as a tool in overcoming conflicts.

The change starts from local communities, which is why Felm works with partners that are rooted in them. They assume ownership of their own diaconal efforts. The objectives of diaconal cooperation are defined together with the partners. Felm makes it a priority to listen to the partners because they are the experts in their own context and needs. The collaboration is a long-term process based on strong trust and a mutual connection. Moreover, the strengths, needs, operating environment and changing situations of the partners are taken into account in the diaconal partnerships. Felm commits to promote joint learning and continuous development of the activities. Furthermore, we also follow the principles of collaboration, inclusion and work partnerships in Finland. Felm supports its partners' grassroot-level diakonia and diaconal initiatives.

Felm promotes its partners' efforts to help people with everyday crises and conflict situations. At the same

time, Felm aims to strengthen the actions and resilience of communities and population groups affected by the climate crisis. Felm also promotes preparedness for the impacts of the climate crisis. Moreover, Felm supports development cooperation, humanitarian work and efforts to promote peace as part of comprehensive diakonia.

Felm strengthens the theological and diaconal efforts of churches by supporting theological education and church leadership. With regard to the support for both theological education and leadership, extensive consideration is given to gender equality and the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Moreover, Felm promotes the participation of persons with disabilities, women, and sexual and gender minorities in diaconal training, management work, and diaconal activities. In addition, Felm strives to increase general awareness of diakonia within churches and in the communities in which the partners operate.

Advocacy is part of the core features of diakonia. Felm continues its advocacy work by defending the rights and dignity of marginalised and excluded individuals. Felm recognises the colonial burden and power ratio associated with mission partnerships and undertakes to dismantle them in diakonia in accordance with the principles of decolonisation. Felm supports and strengthens the local leadership of its partners in diakonia.

5. Felm's added value

Felm brings added value to the diaconal activities of its partnership communities, especially through its in-depth knowledge of the local cultures, long-term commitment to partnerships, and the ability to act quickly in crisis situations. Felm builds skills and knowledge in local communities that will last over time. Through its ecumenical activities, Felm promotes a view of the unity of the Church, a connection among all Christians, and the joint activities of churches. In more tangible terms, this means, for example, the following:

1. **Local ownership and independence:** Felm supports its partners in achieving permanent improvements in their own situations and enables them to manage their own diaconal efforts. This is achieved by educating local operators, building community-specific resources, and helping the partners develop sustainable, locally managed diaconal projects. Continuously developing and interactive diakonia changes the Church in a fundamental way.
2. **Rapid response in crisis situations:** Felm acts flexibly in humanitarian crises, such as natural disasters or conflicts, by providing its partners with emergency assistance, coordination services and resource-based support. In crisis situations, Felm can help its local partners to continue their diaconal activities even in difficult circumstances.
3. **Support for vulnerable groups:** Felm focuses particularly on supporting persons with disabilities, women, children, young people, and gender and sexual minorities. This added value is reflected in the fact that Felm invests in accessibility, participation opportunities, and non-discrimination in diaconal activities.
4. **Cooperation in ecumenical networks:** Felm takes actively part in global ecumenical networks, such as ACT Alliance and the World Council of Churches, which share information, resources and best practices. This cooperation improves the quality and effectiveness of diaconal activities and enables the processing of global challenges, such as climate change, as part of diakonia.

Due to these factors, Felm's diaconal activities are sustainable and long-term efforts which generate benefits for the local communities and strengthen their own inclusion and independence.

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