

“Mofiwa fa ba bangwe ...”: The imperative to generosity and caring – a challenge to the Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika¹

M J Manala & T F J Dreyer
Department of Practical Theology
University of Pretoria

Abstract

In this article, the Afro-Christian imperative of caring and sharing is highlighted as a fundamental response of the church, as the body of Christ, in the face of abject poverty. The extent of poverty in South Africa is sketched, both as an economically and as a socio-spiritually destructive phenomenon. Based on Biblical perspectives, theological principles underlying benevolent services within Reformed churches are outlined and evaluated.

1. INTRODUCTION

The title of this study points to the imperative of generosity and caring as the fundamental response of the church of Christ in the face of the present situation of poverty in South Africa. The church, as an ambassador of Christ, has a mission to give expression to God's compassion in word and deed. The expression “*mofiwa, fa ba bangwe ...*” captures, quite accurately in our view, the generosity of such a caring response demanded from a tightly knit community. But what does this expression mean?

“*Mofiwa, fa ba bangwe ...*” is a rich idiomatic Sepedi expression which raises awareness among communities that personal possessions are always acquired through an unselfish act of giving by the original owner. Possessions so unselfishly given, must also be unselfishly given to those in need, through an act of generosity and caring by the

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recipient. It is a community call, an imperative, which literally means: "You, who have been given possessions, give to others!" The last part of this expression, omitted in the title above, gives the motivation for this demand, namely: "because the one who gave to you did so even though he still cherished possession of those goods." One is called to give the very best, not that which is no longer precious in one's eyes. Hence another expression of the same value, which adds the perspective of the sacrificial nature of sharing: "*bana ba motho ba ngwathelana hlogwana ya tsie*", which, loosely translated, means: "children of a household share a locust's head." One's generosity is therefore not dependent on abundance, but on what is available at that moment. This call emphasises the fact of giving or sharing as a central part of African community life even in the pre-Christian period.

This sharing imperative is in line with the practice of the early Christian community (*koinonia*), the basic point of departure of which was selfless service (*diakonia*) and an intensely sharing and caring lifestyle. The Scriptural message of salvation through God's grace alone should, indeed, move those who by faith have received this gracious gift of salvation to be generous to, and caring towards, those in need. This study seeks to motivate the faith community, in particular the Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika (hereafter HKSA), to become compassionate and caring in practice towards the poor for the sake of and in gratitude to Christ.

2. THE RELEVANCE OF THIS STUDY

Poverty is a serious threat to life all over the world, including South Africa. For serious attention to be paid to the fight against poverty by governments, international, national and local financial agencies, churches and other organisations, all potential role players need to become involved. In South Africa the democratic dispensation has succeeded in ushering in social and political liberation. Development programmes to address poverty put in place by the democratically elected government have, however, yielded minimal success, dashing the hopes of the poor people who rightly or wrongly expected a quicker solution to the crisis of their plight (Mogoba 1996:95; Balcomb 1998:61; Government's Report 1998:9).

3. RESEARCH GAP

Much has been written about poverty and how it may be combated, especially as it appears in Africa (cf Abraham & Mbuy-Beya 1994; Van Rooy 1999; Chitando 1998), and Latin America (cf Boff 1989). The solutions offered have not as yet been applied in South Africa and the question arises whether they can be applied within local communities in general and the HKSA in particular. This we will attempt to establish.

4. HYPOTHESIS

Our assumption is that, if the church could be made aware of the role it could play in the fight against poverty, it would be moved to greater, more committed involvement.

4.1 Methodological approach

4.1.1 Research problem

This study proposes examining critically the theoretical views on and practical implications for benevolent service and development, and suggesting new approaches and strategies. The results gathered in this way will, in conclusion, be applied in the context of the HKSA. We will follow the scheme set out below:

The extent of poverty in South Africa

We will highlight the extent of poverty in the country at the hand of the latest publications on this topic.

Theological evaluation of ecclesiastic deaconate

A theological evaluation of the Greek concept *diakonia* and its implications for the church as caregiver will be given. As point of departure we will enquire into Biblical perspectives which could shed some light on this topic. Secondly, we will identify theological theories as they appear in official church documents of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHKA), the HKSA and the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK).

- Possibilities of a practical theological theory in the context of the HKSA
The results arrived at in this study will be applied in the context of the HKSA
- Conclusion
In conclusion we will offer recommendations on the ways and means of ecclesial involvement.

5. THE EXTENT OF POVERTY IN SOUTH AFRICA

5.1 An overview

With the dawn of the South African democratic dispensation in 1994, the poor prematurely celebrated their liberation from the grip of poverty. The democratically elected government indeed displayed genuine concern for the poor, especially the previously disadvantaged black majority. Thanks to this concern, plans, programmes and strategies were put in place to combat poverty, albeit with minimal success.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (R D P), which was hailed as an appropriate and effective poverty-combating programme, in relation to backlogs and expectations, has had modest success in areas like low-cost housing, electricity supply, provision of running water and telephone connections. The Growth, Employment and Redistribution programme (Gear), the government's macro-economic policy – opposed even by the ruling party's tripartite partners and also criticised by some delegates at the Poverty Summit at Midrand in June 1998 – is blamed for more job losses (Briggs 1998:14). The Presidential Job Summit, with its pledge by public servants of a day's salary, has to date not resulted in concrete job creation. That cannot be a good omen for South Africa's future. Mogoba (Burger 1996:95) sums up this situation aptly: "All the excitement of a new dispensation, a new land, a new South Africa, amounts to nothing unless they can be translated into better and fuller life for all." This conclusively points to the fact that, instead of a better life for all, we have in South Africa an increase in and acceleration of poverty.

5.2 A closer look at the reality and extent of poverty in South Africa

The increase in poverty has been expressed differently by different people at different times. The following statements bear testimony to the situation of swelling poverty:

Tsele (1996:4): "... poverty must be taken seriously because it is now like a plague, which affects all of us." Poverty is rightly described as a plague, a pest, and a nuisance. Goba (1996:4): "... it is a 'time bomb' which will explode in our faces and destroy the new South Africa if it is not defused soon." The rate at which crime increases indicates how Goba's 'time bomb' is indeed already exploding in our faces. Crime traumatises law-abiding citizens and scares away investors, thus working against economic growth and job creation. Minister Jeff Radebe also expressed similar sentiments when, during the opening night of the Poverty Summit, he called poverty: "an all-embracing phenomenon ...[whose] tentacles reach all areas of our society" (Challenge 1998:14). These solemn words can only confirm the fact that poverty has indeed got out of hand and can no longer be tolerated.

The picture looks even more grim in the light of statistical data. Guma (1996:5-9), of the department of Development Ministries of the South African Council of Churches provides statistical data on poverty in a report to the Indaba for Church Development Workers Conference, held in Johannesburg on 17-19 April 1996. Data from a recent study of Key Indicators, which classifies 40% of households as poor, was submitted broken down in the following manner:

- 53% of the population live in the poorest 40% of households – more than half of the population;
- 75% of the poor live in rural areas;
- 42% of the poor live in two provinces: Eastern Cape and Northern Province.
- 70% of the poor live in former homelands.
- Most of the poor are Africans.
- Households headed by females are much more likely to be poor.
- About 61% of children live in poverty.
- Less than 30% of the poor are working.
- The Migrant Labour system left rural communities with a high proportion of women, children and the aged.

These figures are cause for grave concern, especially when it is considered that millions of children without nutritious food were not covered in the study (Guma 1996:7). When one considers the escalation of HIV-AIDS infection realistically, it becomes clear that we are about to be confronted by the far more serious crisis of having to care for millions of orphaned children. The extent of poverty, as these figures indicate, demands urgent joint action to combat poverty. No wonder the agitation sensed in Tsele's words at the Poverty Summit in June 1998: "Talk, talk, talk. Slogan, slogan! slogan! Now we need action" (Challenge 1998:14). It can indeed be safely said that the extent of the poverty crisis is greater than available studies – and the imagination – can capture accurately. It certainly is difficult to see how one can survive on a monthly income of R178-00, which is reported to be what some of the poorest, also called the "ultra-poor", have to contend with (Challenge 1996:2). The situation of the 21% of people in the US who are poor forced the churches thereto forge unity and explore together – and *with* the government and the business sector – effective ways of addressing and overcoming poverty (Woodrick 1998:25). What then will the massive poverty in South Africa demand? Certainly a more concerted, joint effort by all – churches, organisations, the government and the business sector.

Illiteracy and unemployment are other indicators of poverty. It was reported in 1996 that illiteracy stood at 40% of the country's adults. It was further reported that, of all the poor people, 50% were without education or with an incomplete education (1996:3). This situation frustrates even well-meant efforts to help promote and improve employability among these people. Regarding unemployment, it was reported that less than 30% of people of working age in actual fact had a job (Challenge 1996:2). There is absolutely no doubt that something very urgent and innovative must be done to prevent the worst form of destruction of our society. Balcomb (1998:61) warns of the possibility of a second revolution: "But this will be a revolution of the politically enfranchised and economically disenfranchised poor." This statement radicalises the imagery of poverty as a "time bomb" mentioned above. But it also raises the necessary awareness that those who have been blessed cannot continue to enjoy abundance while their poor neighbours are living in abject poverty. The correct sentiment to be appealed to should, however, not be fear for the worst repercussions, but rather compassion akin to that of Christ.

Poverty is not only felt at the economic level, but also at social and spiritual levels where its dehumanising and demoralising character is strongly manifested.

5.3 Poverty is dehumanising and demoralising

Poverty is, in essence, destructive of human dignity and identity. Van Aarde, who defines poverty in the New Testament from the social scientific anthropological perspective, says: "*Hierdie saak het te make met sosiale identiteit in terme van 'toegekende' (ascribed) teenoor 'verwerfde' (achieved) sosiale rolle*" (Van Aarde 1996:952). According to this insight, the poor see themselves in terms of the way they are viewed and treated within the broader social context. Their sense of self is destroyed by negativity. Making use of Allen and Rainwater's views, he therefore defines the poor as people who "experience degraded, negatively valued social identities, as indicated by pejorative labels that are frequently applied" (Van Aarde 1996:952). He continues by pointing to the nature and goal of intervention programmes in this regard: "Hence, to alter social identity it is necessary to change the social organisation so that a greater proportion of achieved roles can be enacted by the poor" (Allen, in Van Aarde 1996:952). The poor, in this sense, need to be helped to identify and recognise their worth and roles in society. Sontag (1996:614) gives a comprehensive definition of the "truly poor": "The 'truly poor', then, are those who fail the spiritual as well as the physical test of minimum subsistence and who need help on both levels." Sontag suggests that in our attempts to help the poor, we must operate on two divergent levels simultaneously and that we should avoid reducing the inner condition to an outer, physical condition (1996:614). Sontag indicates very ably that poverty has both physical and spiritual dimensions and that it therefore needs both physical and spiritual remedies. Francke (in Briese 1996:53) also seeks to address both the physical and spiritual needs of the poor.²

The poor, therefore, need a receptive community. They need a loving context within which they will feel at home, enjoy fellowship and be able to realise their full potential. Van Aarde (1996:952-3) points to the fact that, when the disreputably poor people are ostracised and forced to survive on their own, they form a subculture linked to robbery, drug-dealing and abuse, Satanism and prostitution. Balcomb (1998:66)

² For a holistic view of the poor, see also Van Aarde (1988:843).

therefore rightly questions the logic of the 1980's leadership of the poor, which left them, so to speak, in the lurch in the 1990's while their lot has not changed much at all. Left in such a situation, the poor experience meaninglessness, lovelessness and hopelessness, as pointed out by Jennings (1997:332), citing Cornell West, a Christian philosopher in the USA. It is such contexts which give rise to what Abraham calls a serious "cry for life." Describing the context of increasing poverty, deprivation and oppression in Third World countries, Abraham (1994:209) captures that situation in scintillating terms: "In that context, the word 'cry' captures the mood of the situation. The cry of the Third World today is a cry for life. It is a cry for freedom and dignity without which life is *less than human* (emphasis mine). It is a cry for rice and bread, eaten in community and belonging. It is a cry of protest as well as a cry of hope." Deprivation of material, of belonging to a community and of human worth, is the real crisis of the poor. It is obvious from the above description of poverty and the poor that what is needed is more than just economic or spiritual assistance. We are convinced that love, acceptance and community are the responses needed most to lay a strong groundwork also for economic assistance (cf Dreyer 1995:57). These are, in our view, the very essence of Christian service and of the church's life and work as servant (*diakonos*). In the following section we will offer an evaluation of theological perspectives with regard to the church's task as God's servant.

6. THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF ECCLESIASTICAL DEACONATE

6.1 General definition of the word deacon

Fowler & Fowler (1924:205) define the word deacon thus: "Minister of charity in the primitive church; minister of third order (*bishop, priest, d.*) in Episcopal Church; secular officer of Presbyterian congregation."

It is remarkable that, in all three the descriptions, service receives due emphasis. That is correct because in the Bible the Greek word *diakonia*, used for service, from which our word deacon is derived, is used for a variety of church activities. The problem with this definition, however, is the fact that prominence is given to church office bearers and not to the church, the body of Christ. This is probably the result of an exclusive

emphasis, in the early theological tradition, on the shepherd-flock model at the expense of the body-of-Christ model. Another problem is a twofold one, a physical reduction and degradation of the office of the deacon to that of a liturgical helper. There is in the third meaning a suggestion of this dichotomy: "sacred vs. secular" which, in our view, subdivides the service of God unduly and leads to a biased emphasis on either the sacred or the secular as the only mode of service, either for its perceived holiness or relevance, respectively. Pont (s a:22), rightly rejects any shabby treatment of the diaconate. Now we turn to an exploration of the Biblical perspectives for a clearer understanding of the issue.

6.2 Biblical perspectives

6.2.1 *Diakonos* – servant of God and of God's people

The words *deacon* and *diaconate* have their origin in the Greek words *diakonos* and *diakonia* respectively. What do these words mean? Deist (1990:65) gives the following meaning in respect of *deacons* in the Reformed churches: "the officials whose duty it is to collect money and/or goods in a local congregation and to distribute this among the needy of that congregation." Again we find here a description of servanthood only as being vested in the office of the deacon, as though this was the primary responsibility and task of the office per se. Another discrepancy in this definition is that in it the task of the deacon is limited to that of a collector and distributor of physical means of survival. In the Bible (cf Ac 6), we learn that among the seven men elected for the merciful service there were preachers, while the Reformed tradition also gives to the deacons the task of comforting the poor with the Word of God. A broader perspective is given in the Westminster Dictionary of the Bible (1976:215). It defines the deacon as: "[... a servant, a waiting man, a messenger. It is used in this sense in Matt 20:26, where it is translated "minister" ("servant" RSV), and is distinguished from *doulos*, bond servant or slave in the next verse]." An important aspect is the fact that in all these definitions *diakonos* refers to the servant of God and of God's people. Van Staden (1979:115) points to the multiple usage of the word *diakonos* in the New Testament. He says it is used to refer to the following people and instances: servant (Mt 20:26; 23:11; Mk 10:43), servant of the

gospel (Col 1:23), servant of the church (Col 1:25), servant of the new covenant (2 Cor 3:6), servant of God (2 Cor 6:4). The word points to an office in and of the church, for example 1 Timothy 3:8, where Paul speaks about the requirements set for a deacon. In Romans 16:1, Phoebe is called a servant of the church.

From the above references it is clear that the servant spoken of here is the one in the service of God. He is the instrument through which God renders his freely willed service to his people.

6.2.2 *Diakonia* is the comprehensive service of the living God

Diakonia refers, as has been indicated, to the integrated service of the living God. Engelbrecht (1970:37) puts this matter in perspective when he says:

Soos uit Luk 10:40, 22:26-27 en Joh 2:5-9 blyk, beteken diaken in die oorspronklike taal veral kelner of tafelbediende. Die voedsel wat Gods tafelbediende aan sy kinders moet voorsit, is egter tweërlei:

Eerstens is daar die bediening van die Woord, die Brood van die lewe (bv. Hand 6: 3, Matt 24:45, Joh 6:35, 1 Tim 4:6 en 1 Pet 2:2).

Maar onlosmaaklik hiermee verbonde is daar ook die bediening van die gewone liggaamlike voedsel, kleding en versorging van hulle wat in nood is soos blyk uit Hand 6:1-3 wat albei hierdie bedieninge; altwee soorte diakensamp stel en hulle verband aantoon.

There is therefore an inseparable connection between the service of the Word and care for the physical needs of God's people. The separation of this twofold service that is, undermines Scriptural evidence and distorts the church's required intervention in human needs. Some churches have, for example, concentrated on the Word, neglecting the existential needs of God's people, and *vice versa*. Jesus Christ, the Great Deacon (Engelbrecht 1970:37; De Klerk 1976:1), offered himself as the Bread of life and preached the good news of salvation on the one hand, and fed the hungry and healed the sick on the other. This integrated character of God's service is explained in impressively clear terms by, among others, Van der Walt and Van der Westhuizen. Van der Walt

(1995:20) writes: “Ware Christelike evangelisasie is altyd sosiale aksie. En ware Christelike sosiale aksie is altyd evangeliserend van aard.” Van der Westhuizen (in Booysen 1993:68) puts it in a different but interesting way: “Die punt is net dat die sending nie bifokaal is nie, nie Brood en brood nie, maar Brood beteken ook brood.” The service is indeed the one holy service of the living God. The Word however has precedence.

Engelbrecht (1970:38-39) agrees that the Word of God should get precedence. One of the most important passages from Scripture he cites is John 6:27: “You should work, not for this perishable food, but for the food that lasts, the food of eternal life.” Engelbrecht also cites the words of our Lord in Matthew 6:33: “Set your mind on God’s kingdom and justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well.” These passages affirm the precedence of the Word of God. This though does not mean that care for the physical needs of the needy is unimportant and can therefore be neglected. On the contrary, it means that God’s deep concern for the poor is sure ground for His mandate to His church to care for the poor (Kritzinger 1996:2). Engelbrecht (1970:39) confirms this mandate with the words of Deuteronomy 15:11: “The poor will always be with you in your land, and that is why I command you to be open-handed towards any of your countrymen there who are in poverty and need.” This mandate has the purpose of binding the church to God’s gracious service of reconciling the world with Him. It is thus a matter of building up the right relationship with God (De Klerk 1976:2). This merciful service, says de Klerk, is underpinned by and performed within the covenant relationship between God and His people. Kloppers, according to Kritzinger (1996:9), says: “The Biblical truth about poverty is not that it be transformed into wealth, but that the poor as well as the rich should be in the right relationship with their possessions and with the Giver of their possessions.” The gifts that are given to the poor should represent and give expression to God’s immeasurable mercy.

6.2.3 Christian *diakonia* is the expression of God’s mercy

God showed mercy to His people in both word and in deed (De Klerk 1976:2). Within the covenant relationship benevolent deeds to the poor, widows, orphans and strangers were enforced through holiness laws and other measures, with Yahweh’s mercy as moti-

vation (Venter 1993:1-10). This mercy De Klerk (1976:6) traces back to include also God's work of creation. Israel had to express this mercy in word and in deed. God's deep concern and mercy determine the nature of His people's life and conduct towards all people, particularly those who have no one else to turn to. It can therefore rightly be said, as Koekemoer (1980:69) mentions, that showing mercy to the needy is obligatory for Christians.

God's mercy was fully and concretely revealed in and through Jesus Christ's selfless service in the world and his propitiatory death. De Klerk (1976:11) writes:

Die teken dat die Groot Barmhartige deur die wêreld gaan om gewondes en verslaendes te red (Ps 146); die teken van die koninkryk dat die Groot Koning van alle barmhartigheid Homself die lot van die ellendige aantrek, sou ten duidelikste blyk met die koms en openbaring in Jesus Christus onse Here.

The incarnation is indeed the heart of the doctrine of reconciliation. It is the concretisation of God's merciful service to humankind. The mercy so abundantly received by those who believe in Jesus Christ should serve as the highest motivation for His church to commit itself to behave and act benevolently towards the poor and destitute.

6.2.4 Generosity to and caring for the poor are essential services of the congregation as the living *koinonia*

This essential service did not have to come to an end with the ascension of Christ. Christ therefore called His church to continue this service in the world. Romein (1981:81) refers to this service as God's mandate to the church. He writes: "... Want het is de opdracht in dienst van Christus dienend te gaan leven midden in de kerk en midden in de wereld" Seen in this light, the church can and must essentially live and act as deacon in the world. The church is called out of the world (*ecclesia*), to become the *familia Dei*, the household of God around the pulpit, the baptismal font and the communion table (cf Romein 1981:80). This *familia Dei* is also called the *koinonia*, which refers to the tightly knit community of believers which is known for its mutual love, acceptance and caring. This *koinonia* the Christian church confesses every Sunday, and it means that the

believers are jointly, but also separately, members of the same body of Christ and share in the wealth and gifts of Christ. Each member is obliged to use his or her gifts voluntarily and happily for the edification of others (Koekemoer 1993:25; De Klerk 1976:14).

The Great Commandment (Mt 22:37-39) is, as Booysen (1966:21) points out, an important orientation for the Christian practice of compassionate service. Dreyer (1995: 57) also points to this imperative when he writes: "Naasteliefde is deel van die groot liefdesgebod en vind ook neerslag in die barmhartigheidsdiens."

The love of God and of the neighbour cannot only be paid lip service to, but must indeed find concrete expression in the congregation's deeds of generosity, hospitality and caring towards the least – the poor and the destitute. This is the essence of the church's obedient life (Booyesen 1993:50). The brotherhood and sisterhood of the faith community, established through a shared loyalty and belonging to God through faith in Jesus Christ, place an obligation on Christians to love and care for each other. Christians are thus called to give in all their services, especially to the poor, a genuine reflection of Christ's service and mercy (cf Koekemoer 1980:5; cf Lk 6:36). This mutuality is, in the words of de Klerk (1976:19), an expression of the living communion with the eternal God in Christ. Love and care for the poor are also a way of living in concrete, true faith, as Pop (in De Klerk 1976:15) points out: "De gemeenskap (koinonia) tussen de Christene onderling was niet een gezindheid maar een daad. Het kwam neer op een delen in alkan-ders vreugde en verdriet, rykdom en armoede, vrede en verdrukking." The *koinonia* is indeed the sphere within which members meet each other and are able to interact so intimately that they can see and feel each other's troubles clearly. Koekemoer (1993:25) describing the solidness and helpfulness of the relationship that is found and experienced within the *koinonia* cites Brunner's enlightening words quoted by de Klerk (1974:63): "In plaas van eensaamheid tree: gemeenskap. Gemeenskap is: dat ek werklik oopgaan vir die u, dat u en ek saamkom. Gemeenskap is dieselfde as liefde. En hierdie liefde is alleen uit die geloof wat dieselfde is: alleen uit Christus." Such a situation can only lead to genuine concern for and concrete involvement in each other's concerns and pain. Koekemoer (1993:25) says the following about the faith community and its subsequent concrete compassion: "Die geloofsgemeenskap word profeties vanaf die kansel verkondig in

woorde wat opgevolg moet word in dade.” The link between compassion and preaching on Sunday is put in clear terms in the above statement.

The early Christian church is an example par excellence of intimate bonding, founded on loyalty to prayer, teaching and a deep sense of sharing (Ac 2:42-47). Fennely & Shank (1998:42), for example, report that this example of the early Christian church was followed by churches in the US when in their “Pentecost to Overcome Poverty” campaign they employed the theme Pray, Teach and Share in order to mobilise churches for meaningful and concrete involvement. The church which is loyal to God’s Word and Will cannot do otherwise than become actively involved in initiatives to alleviate the poverty and misery of others. That was exactly what the early church did under the leadership of the apostles and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

But as the church grew the need for the appointment of a special group of people to take charge of this service of love of the church arose. The seven men (Ac 6:5) who are accepted as being the forerunners of the present-day deacons were then elected and inducted into the service. The office of the deacon was thus instituted. The task of the deacon then became the organisation of the church’s benevolent service, the training and motivation of the congregation towards taking up the full responsibility of this caring mandate (Booyesen 1993:52). The deacon’s task therefore entails assessment of needs, promotion of stewardship and hospitality, collection and distribution of resources for benevolence and the development of programmes aimed at helping the poor. They are also called to speak words of Christian encouragement (Buka ya Kereke 1979:155). Their task is thus a demonstration of the care of the Lord (Buka ya Kereke 1979:155). Here (in the church) is indeed the right place where concrete witness to Christ’s mercy can and must be given.

6.3 The church’s compassionate service is service in and to God’s honour

God’s honour is certainly the axis around which every church service revolves or should revolve. The gifts given in God’s name to His needy children should therefore be given with the right attitude. The right attitude is that which is found in God Himself, namely a special concern for the disadvantaged and the weak (Kritzinger 1996:2). It is for this reason that God’s Word guarantees the right of the poor (Ex 23:6, Dt 27:19), which is in

fact the right which God has to our possessions (Engelbrecht 1970:39). The prosperous should therefore not accept their wealth as something obvious, but should see in their blessings an incentive to assist others (Kritzinger 1996:3). Assistance should be given in obedience to God's will.

Only genuine faith in Christ can conceive of such an attitude; faith that sensitises and humbles one towards selfless service and total surrender to God's will. Caregivers should see the poor as "a tremendous offer" (Calvin, in Dumermuth 1994:408) of God to them. Calvin says: "God offers him the poor as His substitute (Mt 25:31ff). The poor are, thus, the offer of a fulfilled and meaningful life. It is only through the poor that the rich can become true human beings." True humanity then is a matter of the right relationships – both of humankind with God and with fellow humans. Through contact with the poor, the rich are indeed offered an opportunity to exercise true neighbourly love, mercy and care, like the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:33-37). Calvin (in Dumermuth 1994:409) emphasises this issue further:

Our Lord offers them (the poor) to us as if he intended to say: 'I want that the rich mingle with the poor, that the poor receive and the rich give and thereby get honoured by both alike. If a rich person is in a position to act benevolently and the poor person realises that he receives in my name, then both will praise me'. The rich are not condemned to remain alone with their wealth. They can share and experience the bliss of fellowship and break through the solitude of material wealth (brackets mine).

This fellowship in solidarity with the poor is thus God's demand to the faith community. It is a means of honouring the living God. The tenacity of this solidarity is expressed in scintillating terms by the National Council of Churches in India:

Solidarity with the poor means stepping in for the poor, identifying totally with the poor, accepting the poor and being accepted by the poor, giving to the poor and receiving from the poor, participating in the joys and sorrows of the poor, sharing in the shame and glory of the poor. Thus the church's solidarity

with the poor should become a real living everyday experience of every Christian.

(NCCI Newsletter, 1999:9)

Such solidarity should, however, remain theocentric and should not tend towards elevating the poor and poverty to virtuous heights. Solidarity with the poor should be exercised in the name of Christ, in obedience to God and in gratitude for His work of salvation. The honour of God should still be the overriding factor. God is honoured when neighbourly love and care are shown to the needy within the household of faith, but also to all people.

6.4 Neighbourly love and care are to be directed to the household of faith and to all the people who are in need

It should be noted that no one receives God's grace on merit. The church's merciful service will therefore not be confined to a few people within a narrower circle, as if they deserve love and care more than those who are outside the advantaged circle. It is true though that priority is to be given to the poor within the own congregation. This is so because these people present an immediate challenge to the congregation, something which is clear from Paul's call to the Galatian Christians to do good to all people, after which he adds: "especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gl 6:10). This does not, however, exclude extending benevolence to outsiders.

The church's service of love must also be rendered to people across congregational, denominational, religious and cultural boundaries. Engelbrecht (1957:20-21) indicates that church help and support for the poor should also be given to a broader community of the needy outside of one's own religion and culture, as Jesus did (Mt 8:5-13, 15:21-28). Azariah (1965:80) supports this view and points to the missionary value of service to non-Christians. He maintains: "But we must not limit our sense of duty only to the Christian fellowship. All who are in need have a claim on our sympathy and our service. Sometimes the very best form of Christian witness is loving help to those who are not Christians." William Temple (in Guma 1996:8) adds, in our view in an important formulation which accurately defines the church's relationship to those outside it: "the

church is the only organisation that exists for its non-members.” The church must indeed make itself available to all needy people whom it comes across. Tucker (in Burger 1996:20) emphasises the extent to which the church must open its doors to all people, especially in areas of abject poverty. He points out: “Everybody in the ghetto does not belong to the church but the church belongs to everyone in the ghetto.” The church, like the Good Samaritan, should become a neighbour to all the needy. Poverty relief by churches in Macedonia, to Christians in Judea (2 Cor 8 & 9; Rm 15:25-27), affirms Christian offering across own church boundaries. In so far as it is possible (Booyens 1993:58), the church must show mercy to a broader community. The service must indeed also be rendered across political boundaries, because its source and norm is the Bible, which, Kerhein (1996:19) rightly points out: ...cuts across political demarcations.” From the above-mentioned Biblical perspectives churches of the Reformed tradition derived theological perspectives underpinning their compassionate service. What follows below is an evaluation of these perspectives, as propounded especially by the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHKA), HKSA and the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK).

7. AN EVALUATION OF THE THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES UNDERLYING COMPASSIONATE SERVICE IN THE REFORMED CHURCHES

7.1 Theological principles

The theological principles derived from the above-mentioned Biblical perspectives give a wonderful theoretical framework for the sound practice of the church’s compassionate service. We briefly mention these principles below, after which an evaluation is made. A study compiled by Dreyer (1995:56-57) has been quite helpful in this regard. The principles are the following:

- Ecclesiastical benevolent service is founded on God’s love and care, particularly as expressed in the life and work of Jesus Christ.

- Neighbourly love is part of the Great Commandment of love, which also finds expression in benevolent service.
- Neighbourly love is directed to all those who are in need and appeal to you for help.
- Neighbourly love goes hand in hand with the input of my person as a visible illustration of God's care.
- The faith community, the koinonia climate, is the ideal sphere within which benevolence can take place.
- Familial structures provide the natural and most suitable replacement when normal support falls away because of certain circumstances.
- The household of faith is the primary focal point of care, but the diaconal perspective also focuses on the broader needy community.
- Even though it is the deacon who is responsible for the collection of offerings and organisation of the congregation's benevolent service, every believer is called upon to participate.
- When the needs of another come closer and become visible, an appeal is directed to you to serve and to offer.
- Alongside physical support the essence of benevolence lies in closeness, warmth, love, presence, comfort and encouragement by the faith community.

If one is to give a fair evaluation of these principles then one must look at both the positive and the negative sides of the service as it emerges in the practical life of the Reformed churches.

8. ON THE POSITIVE SIDE

Reformed churches, particularly the two Afrikaans churches with which the HKSA shares ecclesiastical tradition, namely the NHKA and the NG Kerk, rendered wonderful compassionate service helping poor whites out of abject poverty in the 1920's and towards a reasonably prosperous existence. The NG Kerk, over and above the work done to combat poverty and destitution among white people, also directly extended its services across church, cultural and racial boundaries, with the help it offered black people in

building and administering hospitals, clinics, schools et cetera (Kritzinger 1996:6). The NHKA could also reach out to people in need outside the church through its 'General deaconate' (Koekemoer 1993:36) with alimention and other emergency supplies.

In the induction formulary of the NHKA the following three fundamental elements which must be responsible for the effectiveness of the church's benevolent service, appear clearly (Diensboek NHKA 1995:83-85): Benevolent service is the proclamation of God's gracious liberation of humanity from sin in and through His Christ, appropriated through faith in Jesus Christ, and expressed in word and deeds. God Himself equips the deacons for their service through His Word and Spirit. God's justice, honour and peace are to be served, hence the strict requirements for righteousness and honesty set for this office as found in 1 Timothy 3: 8-12.

These elements, coupled with the emphasis on the role of the congregation as God's representative in the calling, election and induction of office bearers, and in the support of benevolent services, (NHKA Diensboek 1995:83-85), form, in our view, a strong basis from which a genuine concern for the poor, as well as faithfulness and enthusiasm for service to the benefit of the poor and commitment to service at the Lord's table can flow. Such emphasis serves to highlight God's ownership of the church's benevolent service and is greatly appreciable in that it wants to prevent human control and arrogance. Provisions of the church order provide further facilitation of the task of deacons, good organisation, administration, attitudes and delivery of diaconal services. The use of very efficient diaconal councils and meetings at all levels, service groups and organs of support, like the Ondersteuningsraad, the Nederduitsch Hervormde Sustersvereniging, Weeshuisbestuur and Ons Tuisbestuur, provides an efficient machinery for good service (cf Kerkorde NHKA Ordereël 2 & 3 and Ordinansie 2 & 3). A real teamwork approach, as provided for in the NHKA's service setting and practice, is indeed what is needed to combat poverty and help the needy effectively. The poor, widows, orphans, the sick and neglected children are thus assisted in their spiritual and existential misery. The emphasis on the comforting task of the deacons, the Word of God, is of great importance as it assures the needy of both temporary and everlasting relief and peace. It correctly emphasises the holistic nature of the church's benevolent service as an

integral part of the church's *diakonia*, whose purpose it is to address the entirety of human misery.

9. ON THE NEGATIVE SIDE

But was this success story of the Reformed churches without a darker side? No, on the contrary, there were problems. Botha (in Booysen 1993:44-46) points to some circumstances which impacted negatively on the church's benevolent services. He mentions reliance on government intervention, individual and organisational involvement, as well as an emergent prosperity as causes of a slump in diaconal awareness and services during the 16th and 17th centuries. He also mentions the development of arrogance in the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, leading to the relegation of recipients of alimentionation to second-class members through church law provisions; for example, they were deprived of the vote in the congregation and had to be content with sitting on "benches for the poor." Such attitudes and conduct definitely defied the principles of caring and distorted a service that should express deep compassion. Similar attitudes are observable even today, though to a lesser degree. People receiving help are often forced to accept opinions from their helpers without question, or without being allowed to give their own opinion. One minister of the HKSA, during a vote of thanks at the end of his ordination ceremony, pledged his ever positive co-operation with the Ringsendingraad, saying he would never "bite the hand that feeds me." This would seem to imply that his motivation for co-operation was the maintenance which he received from the Ringsendingraad, and that differences of opinion would imply biting the hand that feeds. Mpanza (1995:7), writing about the need for revitalisation of the HKSA and relevant leadership (especially ministers), refers to his query about the apparent paternalism which accompanied assistance from the NHKA. He explains that when he asked one senior minister whether he was aware of the situation, he got this response: "Phillipus, whose bread I eat whose song I sing. If you will keep on asking such questions you will lie hungry my boy." This reflects the reply of a person who felt himself helpless, who could only do what would please the provider of help. Whether the singing of the bread-provider's song was a real or perceived demand by the bread-provider, the point is that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, assistance might have been provided in a way that displayed arrogance

and superiority on the part of the giver. Such help can, instead of being empowering, in fact be enslaving and destructive of the recipient's worth as a human being, while creating a quiescent dependence. Chilton (1990:57) notes that charitable activity should lead to the empowerment of the recipient, so that "each one shall bear his own load" (Gl 6:5). To achieve that the church needs to correct all approaches and conduct that do not promote symmetric relationships.

Another defect with regard to the Reformed churches' compassionate service has been the reduction of the deacon's task to that of a mere collector, assistant or aspirant elder (Botha 1993:46; cf also de Klerk 1976:37). This situation could easily lead to the compromise of the church's compassionate service by deacons who might serve in the office merely for the sake of later advancement to a more honourable one, that of elder. The service would then simply become one of convenience. On the other hand, the overemphasis on compassionate service as the task of the deacon and professional church-based social workers, has led, in most churches, to passivity on the part of members. It is, however, encouraging that some churches soon realised the danger of this, and campaigned strongly for involvement and participation of members via the revival of the priesthood of believers. A further problem observable in the church's compassionate service with regard to compliance with theological perspectives is that the value of the family role has not been duly recognised and employed in service provision. The orphans, the aged, strangers and other destitute people whose situations do not necessitate institutional placement, should, for example, be the responsibility of families. Chilton (1990:49) notes in this regard: "The family bears the major responsibility for financial (and other) aid and no other institution or group must usurp this responsibility." Chilton (1990:50) continues: "Family members are best equipped to deal with needy relatives in terms of personal care and attention. They are more aware of the real wants of the person and because they are close to the situation, are most able to detect abuses of charity." The Word of God affirms this truth in 1 Timothy: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." Fortunately the NHKA has realised the need to encourage families to take responsibility for their needy relatives, albeit because of financial

constraints, as government subsidies for some of the church's welfare service institutions are being reduced or withdrawn (Dreyer 1995:58 & 1996:186).

One must also mention that the mission policies of the Afrikaans Reformed churches in South Africa, which hinged on watertight racial separation, have limited the scope of the service only to white Christians, though the NG Kerk's commendable efforts in practically extending benevolent services and development to black people cannot be overlooked. Kritzinger (1996:5-12; 1990:602-620) writes about this wonderful service (cf also NG Kerk A in its community = CASA, 1991:34), but also points to paternalism and the not-so-pure motives with which it was rendered. Such indications point to a regression from the *koinonia* spirit as embodied in the principles governing the compassionate service to be carried out in obedience to God and for the sake of God's honour. Apart from the huge financial support to the HKSA for missionary purposes and activities, for which there is much appreciation, the NHKA has never committed itself to offering merciful services to black members of the HKSA. Van der Westhuizen (in Booysen 1993:78-82), cites policy, lack of diaconal structures in the HKSA, socio-cultural supportive instruments in the latter church's context and other reasons, as causes of the difficulty to identify suitable strategies for providing diaconal services to, or co-operation with, the HKSA in the area of caring and sharing. The biggest problem, we think, lies in the distance between the two churches enforced through the policy of racial separation within what is supposed to be a tightly knit *koinonia*. Intimacy is indeed the basis for being sensitive and positively responsive to appeals of your neighbour for help (Dreyer 1995:57). The HKSA needed – and continues to need – co-operation with the much experienced and well-equipped NHKA in order to make a meaningful contribution to the fight against poverty. In this regard closeness is an absolute requirement, and political and racial considerations should not blur the broader compassionate vision the church should have and strive for. The boundaries of the household of faith should be extended to first embrace the broader denominational components before moving beyond that circle. In this process of co-operation younger churches such as the HKSA can get guidance, motivation and much needed material support. The great achievements of the Afrikaans Reformed churches in providing assistance, fighting and overcoming poverty, can however, never be obliterated and are duly acknowledged. The HKSA too has a

mandate to care for the needy, especially in the present situation of abject poverty – but what possibilities are there for her? This question is answered in part 2 of this article.

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