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DOI: [http://dx.doi.
org/10.18820/23099089/
actat.v39i2.9](http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v39i2.9)

ISSN 1015-8758 (Print)
ISSN 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2019
39(2):147-171

Date Published:
13 December 2019



Published by the UFS
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

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MISSIONAL-DIACONAL PRACTICES IN JAPAN AND SOUTH AFRICA: TRACING ITS FORMATIVE POTENTIAL DURING NATURAL DISASTERS¹

ABSTRACT

This article reflects on missional-diaconal practices in the ecumenical partnership between the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and the Reformed Church in Japan. In both – albeit radically different – contexts, the issue of church formation in a secular age is at stake. How can these Reformed faith communities remain relevant in their respective societies? Can deeper fellowship (*koinonia*) and more direct community involvement (*diakonia*) constructively embody the gospel and foster church formation? The article indicates that, in light of frequent natural disasters, sharing God's compassion in concrete ways has become vital to these churches' existence. Christians face new challenges, as they deepen their involvement in existential challenges caused by disasters and other existing sociopolitical realities. The article explores the potential of

1 A section of this article was presented as an academic paper at a conference entitled Education, Formation and the Church, held at the Theologische Universiteit Kampen, The Netherlands, on 30-31 August 2018.

missional-diaconal practices of local congregations and argues that *diakonia* in all its dimensions embodies the *missio Dei* and contributes to church formation in significant ways.²

1. INTRODUCTION

By way of introduction, Kari Latvus, a Finnish Lutheran biblical scholar and *diakonia* specialist's explanation can help delineate the scope and focus of this research article. Latvus (2017:11) identifies three current worldwide and ecumenical megatrends concerning *diakonia*, namely (1) a growing awareness about, and the importance of care/diaconia; (2) interest in confirming the permanent caritative ministry of deacons, and (3) the scholarly debate regarding the origin and meaning of diaconia vocabulary.

Although it is also crucial to consider in detail the second and third megatrends highlighted above, any further in-depth exploration thereof exceeds the limits of this article. I will focus mainly on the first trend, affirming and explicating the renewed awareness of the significance of *diakonia*, and its influence on church formation in Japan and South Africa.

After briefly exploring these two contexts, its religious landscapes and some Reformed churches' identity and role therein, I will investigate the current constructive impact of missional-diaconal practices and their potential for missional church formation and evangelism during and after natural disasters in a secular age.

2 It is important to note that the concept "missional-diaconal" is not redundant. This term developed from the World Council of Churches' (WCC) discourses in the 1960s, in reaction to a search for a relevant response to issues such as poverty and injustice. Missional-diaconal attempts to simultaneously do justice to both the missionary (some might prefer the term "missional") dimension of being "sent into the world", and the diaconal dimension "to serve in solidarity". These two dimensions of the church's existence are inextricably linked. God's mission in this world involves the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God's covenantal relationship with us as human beings and God's sacrificial identification and solidarity in our midst stress the fact that he became part of our lives. Missional-diaconal practices aim to be holistically involved in the incarnation of the good news, through deep *koinonia* for the sake of God's Kingdom. Therefore, in the words of Knoetze (2009:51), [m]issional diaconia does not primarily want to do things "for" or "to" people, but rather "with" them, through relationships. See also Van der Merwe (2014:198-205).

2. THE DIVERSE RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS OF JAPAN AND SOUTH AFRICA

2.1 Characteristics of Japanese religious practices

In general, Japan's religious context – with literally only approximately 1% Christians – apparently presents an inconsistency between self-identified secularity and popular religious rituals, usually executed as part of national culture. Religion in this context is a composite patchwork, “created by the interweaving of at least five major strands: Shinto, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism and folk religion” (Earhart 2014:2). Japan has never known an era in which Christianity dominated. Since the 1630s, Japanese political leaders inflicted two and a half centuries of its prohibition through self-ordained isolation, because Christianity was ultimately viewed as the “outreach of colonial power” by competing European groups (Josephson 2012:252):

Following the expulsion of Christianity in the seventeenth century, Japan entered a period of relative isolation. In the early eighteenth century, Japan did begin importing European medical and astronomical texts, which they purged of Christian influence. In this way, Japanese intellectuals received a secularized (or at least de-Christianized) version of European civilization before anything of the kind existed in the European world.

In fact, the concept of “religion” was not even used in Japan before around the 1870's.³ After that time, the three early teachings – Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucianism – became splintered and fused in new ways. “Buddhism became a religion, Shinto was divided into religious and secular political forms, and Confucianism became a philosophy.”⁴ In this complicated situation, the church is fighting to survive the onslaught of multiple cults, myths, superstitions and the further marginalization of Christianity. This is exacerbated by political leaders – albeit implicitly – in the current nationalistic, right-winged regime (Josephson 2012:254).

One feature of religion in Japan is its unstructured nature. It is common practice to borrow from and blend formal religious concepts and

3 It is interesting to note Josephson's assertion that, before the 1870s, the Japanese had no indigenous concept of religion analogous to that formulated in the West at any previous point.

4 See Josephson 2012:252. Another significant trait in Japanese religious history is the inclination of contrasting religious strands to discover “ways of accommodation that enable them to fit together within Japanese society” (Reader & Tanabe 1994:123).

traditional animistic beliefs.⁵ This ever-changing nature of religion in Japan causes the persistent danger of syncretism and the compromise of gospel truth. Japanese often adhere to the customs of their closest family and to the traditions of their local neighbourhood shrines. Therefore, the most commonly practised aspect of Japanese religion remains the veneration of ancestors.

Another characteristic of religion in Japan is its pragmatic dimension. For many Buddhist adherents, the practical benefits of their religion are its supposed freedom from problems. For example, typical prayers at temples usually request personal career progress or physical gains such as traffic safety, examination success, healing and good health. These worldly benefits can be purchased by those who make their coin donations in the hopes of receiving favourable returns. It is extensively sold by priests, who mimic the business world by marketing these benefits.⁶ Thus, on face value, it inevitably appears that money and material possessions or atheism are the real, everyday religions of the Japanese. Some popular analyst even dubs it “the most religious atheist country” (Coslett 2015).

In Europe and North America, the wide and deep-spread influence of the so-called “secular age” is uncontested.⁷ In Japan, however, it is not as easy to pinpoint its nature and its real effect. The concept “secularisation” takes on a whole different meaning in Japan.⁸ Although a clear-cut distinction

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- 5 The Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs reported in 2006 that membership claims by religious groups totalled 209 million persons. This number, which is nearly twice the country’s population, reflects many citizens’ affiliation with multiple religions. See United States Department of State Report (2009).
 - 6 Reader & Tanabe (1998:10) contend that concerning Buddhism there is a complementary, as opposed to contradictory, relationship between the search for practical benefits and the goal of enlightenment. According to Mehn (2018:10), [r]eligion in Japan is unstructured and defies analysis because it borrows heavily from other religions and combines values that are contrary to common logic ... the logic of their Japanese religion is that it meets their needs and is effective rather than appearing unified and rational.
 - 7 Smith (2014:xi) asserts that [t]he secular touches everything. It not only makes unbelief possible; it also changes belief – it impinges upon Christianity (and all religious communities). Smith (2014:11) adds: There’s no undoing the secular; there’s just the task of learning how (not) to live – and perhaps even believe – in a secular age.
 - 8 Post-war Japan also faced the influence of rapid secularisation. In the second half of the 20th century, some researchers (for example, Saeki [1967:73]) proposed that it stripped away the so-called “veil of holiness” and emancipated Japanese people from their captivity to religious affiliations. According to Sherrill (2003:167), this freed Japanese to pursue economic

between religious *versus* secular cannot be readily distinguished, the pervasive influence of the “secular age” remains undeniable.⁹

2.2 The challenging realities facing the Reformed Church in Japan (and other churches in Japan)

Churches in Japan are small. With a dwindling Christian minority, and churches averaging roughly 30 people, sharing about Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation presents huge, complex challenges. In many ways, the gospel is viewed as an intrusion, clashing with Japanese culture. Japan thus remains one of the largest so-called “unreached” nations in the world.

Within Japan’s Protestant church groups, the Reformed Church in Japan (RCJ) is a small, solid denomination. Its strong dogmatic and rational foundation appeals to many, but not to all. Its traditional worship style is challenged to be more open for renewal. However, its member churches’ clear evangelistic character and scripturally faithful preaching deserve credit in times of extreme relativity, where apparently “anything goes”. Congregations are fighting for survival in a hostile (albeit covert) sociopolitical environment. The RCJ actively protests against government efforts to turn Japan more politically right-winged, threatening individual rights, re-militarising the nation, promoting the emperor system, Shintoism, and so forth.

For example, at the 2018 RCJ General Synod meeting (held on 8-10 October in Yokohama), a proposal was discussed to send a communication to the Japanese government regarding ceremonies that will take place on 30 April 2019, the date on which Emperor Akihito abdicates and his son, the crown prince Naruhito, is installed as the new emperor. Many, if not most of the ceremonies are based on Shinto beliefs and practices, fundamentally religious in nature and very costly to implement, but will be funded from taxpayer money.

This violates the constitutionally guaranteed separation of religion and government, which forbids the government from engaging in religious activities. The government’s position is that these activities are fundamental to the identity of the Japanese people and are, in fact, not religious, but simply “Japanese”. Lurking behind this thinking is the right-wing groups’ agitation to restore the imperial system and nationalise

development through capitalism and relegated religion to the rather limited role of maintaining various rituals and customs. As the pursuit of material goods captured the interest of society, the church and its evangelistic campaigns lost their appeal.

9 See, for example, Fitzgerald (2003).

Shintoism. Prime Minister Abe and many parliament members are also members of such groups. Many Christian and Buddhist groups thus raise objections to these issues. In an official writing to the authorities, the RCJ clearly declared its protest regarding these plans and urged that the constitutionally guaranteed separation of government and religion be strictly observed.

Furthermore, congregations are rapidly ageing and there is an understandable church culture of being highly protective of membership. Churches also struggle in an uphill battle with the secularisation of society and excessive materialism.¹⁰ The large gaps between local congregations and society in general need to be constructively and creatively addressed.

According to Sherrill (2003:176), religious seekers in contemporary Japan are not seeking personal salvation as much as they are seeking relational redemption. For this reason, religion as rational knowing (essentially how many churches in Japan present Christianity) has hardly any prospect of connecting with contemporary society. An over-emphasis on intellectualism and orthodoxy has contributed to a common failure to connect the meaning of the gospel with contemporary daily living. In addition, the pastor-centred hierarchical leadership style means that laity are often under-utilised in the life and ministry of the church. This is exacerbated by a societal work ethic that thrives on competition, leaving hardly any space and time for church-related activities.

Churches in Japan, in general, tend to look inwards. This is undoubtedly on the margins of society, with literally only 1% of the population being Christian. Therefore, the churches are often preoccupied with internal issues rather than constructive engagement with society. The early 20th century saw some welcome exceptions to this. Kagawa Toyohiko's well-known social welfare is one example.¹¹ Another example is that of

10 It is important to note that, according to cultural anthropologist David C. Lewis (2015:32), assertions about "secularisation" in Japan should be made with much caution, seeing that they are "dependent on the accuracy of attempts to measure religiosity". In his latest book, Lewis (2018:28-29) contends that Japanese continue to move away from organised religion, resist secularisation, and continue to demonstrate spirituality as evident by their religious behaviour.

11 Born in Kobe in 1888, Kagawa Toyohiko lost both his parents at the age of four years, but became a Christian through the guidance of missionaries of the Southern Presbyterian Church (US). His theological studies took him to Tokyo, Kobe and Princeton. During his student days in Kobe, he moved into a slum to serve the physical and spiritual needs of thousands of people. Later he toiled in labour and peasants' movements in Japan and stimulated economic organisations in Japan, as well as peace and social reform endeavours before

Abe Shirō, according to whom, the current needs that should be focused on in Japan are changing in important ways. Earlier, social welfare initiatives concentrated on concrete aid to alleviate economic poverty. Nowadays, societal issues related to the “paucity of the soul” need to be addressed. This particularly concerns issues that emerged in the shadow of Japan’s rapid economic progress, post-World War II.

Everyone needs and has a right to physical provision. Abe understood that we do not live by bread alone. The deeper existential needs of human existence (“poverty of the heart”) are generating new welfare problems that must be addressed. It can be mentioned that these needs have increasingly come to the fore in the aftermath of the recent enormous natural disasters in the Kobe (1995), Sendai (2011) and Kumamoto (2016) areas.

Abe also contended that church activities concerning the Japanese society can be divided into two groups. One is the priestly role of embodying neighbourly love, in other words caring servitude that provides for people’s basic needs by showing compassion. The other is the prophetic responsibility of asserting critique in ways that are beneficial to the Japanese society. Abe challenged churches to critique societal systems and structures. By voicing constructive ideas for fair policies and social development, the church can help society steer away from a self-serving inward focus.

Therefore, Christian social welfare must walk ‘with society’, keeping pace ‘a step ahead of society’ as a pioneer and forerunner, and serving ‘a step behind the society’ to gather up and care for those left behind. (Abe, quoted in Endō 2003:355).

Significantly, as Endō (2003:354) highlights, it was the notion of “*the church as diakonia*” that connected Christianity and social welfare for Abe, primarily because he viewed the church as a community that serves, in solidarity, the neighbouring society via multiple ministries, thus surpassing mere religious propaganda.

and after World War II. Kagawa was a prolific writer, but fundamentally an evangelist throughout his life. He died in 1960. See Anderson (1998).

2.3 Characteristics of South Africa's religious landscape and the Dutch Reformed Church's identity and role

Over 80% of the South African population – radically different from Japan – identify themselves as Christians.¹² The Christian communities are, however, increasingly influenced by post-Christendom challenges, including secularisation, although its real influence remains contested.¹³ Changes within the dominant African population group, also called Black people (79%), significantly influence the growth of Christianity in the country as a whole.¹⁴ In general, established, mainline churches (Reformed, Methodist, Lutheran, Anglican, and so forth) are currently losing their previously held dominance. By contrast, African Independent Churches, the Pentecostal and the new Independent Churches are growing rapidly.¹⁵

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) is one of the mainline churches in South Africa, and dates back to 1652, when Jan van Riebeeck established a Dutch Cape Colony of the Dutch East India Company.¹⁶ In the meantime,

12 Schoeman (2017:2-3) points out that 89% of them were raised in the Christian tradition, and 87% indicated in 2010 that they are Christians: Christians held strong orthodox views in relation to the Christian doctrine, claiming to believe in God (74%) and in the Bible as the literal word of God (64%); 'Jesus is the solution to all the world's problems' (76%). This apparently positive picture does not tell the whole story. Nominal Christians abound in South Africa, in a society where a Christian frame of mind has become the norm with many people, without even thinking about it, and church membership has simultaneously become a cultural function (Niemandt 2007:14-15).

13 Schoeman (2017:6-7) highlights the issue by asking: "Is South Africa a Christian or secularised country, or what is the position of religion within the South African society?". Durand (2002:29) and Conradie (2006:70) agree that the influence of the process of secularisation is unmistakable in the latter part of 20th-century South Africa. However, another well-known proponent of the secularisation theory, namely the renowned religious sociologist Peter Berger (2008:2), changed his mind on the matter, stating: "The contemporary world is anything but secularized. On the contrary, it is furiously religious." These contradicting opinions indicate clearly that it is difficult to pinpoint the exact extent of secularisation in South Africa. It remains a complex and contested issue.

14 An estimated 86% of South Africans were affiliated to the Christian religion, while 5,4% professed to following ancestral, tribal, animist or other traditional religions. An estimated 1,9% of the population considered themselves Muslim while 5,2% did not follow any religion in particular (Statistics South Africa 2015:27).

15 See Hendriks (2005:83).

16 In total, the DRC in South Africa consists of 1,158 congregations, geographically organised in 144 presbyteries, and with 10 regional synods, one of which is

vast developments have changed the face of the DRC. It currently wrestles with its identity and calling in a radically transformed political arena since the 1990s. One researcher described the mood in the DRC – at the start of the 21st century – as one of total paralysis among the vast majority of DRC members and pastors.¹⁷ Nowadays, the troublesome residues of apartheid confront the ideals of the so-called rainbow nation – carving a bright future from its pervasive diversity.

Radical changes in society pushed the church into the middle of society's most pressing issues such as, for example, poverty aid, human dignity, early childhood development, HIV/AIDS, unemployment, violence, crime prevention, radical land reform policy changes, and so on. During the apartheid regime, the DRC viewed its role as guiding from the outside or from above, influencing with self-appointed authority. In addition, missionary work in that era was, in many ways, done from a position of colonialism.¹⁸

Since the early 1990s, churches and their pastors have lost their privileged societal position of authority. DRC leaders are currently learning to serve from below, in times of disruptive transitions.¹⁹ Churches are directly confronted with issues such as human dignity, reconciliation, church unity, and justice. The injustice and disparities of the apartheid ideology are still dividing communities. Re-integrating and re-orienting in a multiracial society is hard work. In such a predicament, direct community involvement (active *diakonia* and *koinonia*) often speaks clearer than sermons, at least for most of the people in contemporary South Africa, I presume.²⁰

2.3.1 The DRC's *diakonia* embodies its core missional calling

Amid the above giant challenges, which can create much despair at times, there are also hopeful developments. Since 2006, for example, the concept “service and witness in unity” was coined. This gave impetus to a more integrated diaconal involvement, whereby church members of both the DRC and the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa (URCSA)

in neighbouring Namibia. See Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika ([s.a.]). See also Jaarboek (2019).

17 See Steyn (2005:551).

18 See Saayman (2007).

19 Burger (1995:9) described this as a time of liminality, where one finds oneself in an in-between time, on the periphery. This causes a sense of disorientation. Saayman (2007:105) paraphrased the Afrikaners' feelings as “helplessness, powerlessness and desperation”.

20 See Niyonsaba (2018).

started partnering directly, in a combined *diakonia* on grass-roots level.²¹ At the same time, new conversations on *diakonia* started evolving in other theological subdisciplines. For example, the specialist subfield of “development research”, within the larger academic field of Practical Theology, gave impetus to new conceptions of church-based social involvement.²² More still needs to be done in terms of addressing the structural causes of injustice, poverty, and so on, and not simply trying to cope with combatting their effects.

There remains one core question that constantly needs to be asked: How can the DRC – in a very real sense now a minority group on the fringe of society – remain relevant in the 21st century? In a country in which the elimination of poverty and the reduction of inequality are the main priorities, what should the church’s response be? Its credibility will not depend on its words (only), but on the way it exists among suffering communities. Indeed, the DRC’s (missional-diaconal) service in society will determine its relevance. In a secular age, the apathy of church members needs to be challenged and transformed by the dire need for empathy for, and solidarity with our neighbours.²³

The DRC has an extensive track record of compassionate service via church ministry (in Afrikaans, *diens van barmhartigheid*) in the 20th century.²⁴ However, these ministries were inextricably tied to a nationalist, apartheid theology (*volksteologie* with its *volksdiakonaat*) of White people.²⁵ This was typical of an ecclesio-centric approach originating from the so-

21 Van der Merwe (2014:19) indicates that this development already started after the major sociopolitical transformations in 1994, bringing the synod-organised social welfare services to an inevitable crossroads.

22 See, for example, Swart (2004; 2006).

23 Jonker (2008:5) calls this apathetic posture of some DRC church members their “suffocating disinterest”.

24 Van der Merwe (2014:2) highlights that the DRC was the single largest service delivery organisation to the White population of South Africa in the 20th century. It made a huge impact on this group’s societal welfare, through its ten well-structured regional synods.

25 Van der Watt (2010:166) confirms this, stating: It became customary in the DRC to understand compassionate service to be work done amongst the “white” members of the DRC and the diaconal and social work amongst black people has been called “mission”. This was one result of early Afrikaners (White people in South Africa from European descent) colonist self-conception as ethnocentric. Saayman (2007:21) explains that this ethnocentrism was therefore typically built on contemporary stereotypes, and two important stereotypes which affirmed Western (white) superiority were “civilization” and “Christianity” and the two were indissolubly connected.

called *Corpus Christianum*, which already developed in the 4th century with Constantine's institutionalised Christendom.

Therefore, a new paradigm is affirmed, one that is born from a missional theological starting point. It embodies a spirituality that leads to a diaconal attitude towards suffering people in need of justice and compassion.²⁶ This missional theology is built upon the Triune God, as origin, foundation and end goal of all diaconal involvement. The church lives in the Trinity through deep and self-sacrificial community, in its following after the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The church is community, not for the sake of community, but for the sake of participation in God's mission. God and God's mission (*missio Dei*) are essentially relational and communal, and the same is true of the church (*missio ecclesiae*).²⁷

Diakonia, in all its dimensions and practices, essentially embodies (makes real) the *missio Dei*. God's own sending of his people – for the purposes of his Kingdom in this world – is enlashed by faithful servants who justly love their neighbours as themselves.²⁸ Hence, in this article, the concept “missional-diaconal” describes this vital element of church formation in contemporary Japan and South Africa. The reason for this is that *diakonia* is not merely another component of, or committee within congregations, but it rather belongs to the core of the church's existence.²⁹

26 Van der Merwe (2014) argues very convincingly for this new paradigm for *diakonia* in the DRC, and his significant research on this issue is well worth taking note of.

27 For its *Raamwerkdokument oor die missionale aard en roeping van die NG Kerk* (Framework document on the missional nature and calling of the Dutch Reformed Church), see Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika (2013:199-215). See also Niemandt (2015) to understand the bigger link between the DRC's missional ecclesiology – understanding the church as missional by its very nature – and its converging relation to the contemporary ecumenical discourse on church and mission, specifically with reference to the WCC's 2013 affirmation on mission and evangelism entitled “Together towards life”. See Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (2012).

28 This focus on the Kingdom of God is crucial from a missionary perspective, because the church is not an end goal of existence in itself. Rather, the church exists for God's Kingdom (Newbigin 1981:4).

29 In the words of Nordstokke (2009:29), *Diakonia* is thus an intrinsic element of being Church and cannot be reduced to an activity by certain committed persons or made necessary by external social conditions. In another article, Nordstokke (2013:286), in alignment with the WCC, states: Just as the whole work of Christ can be described as *diakonia*, so the whole task of the Church can be understood as *diakonia*. See also Dietrich *et al.* (2014:4-5).

Currently, the DRC is being challenged to expand its understanding, from the traditional “compassionate service” to *diakonia* – a concept that is ecumenically defined in a more holistic way, due to a significant paradigm shift among theorists of *diakonia* over the past two decades. At least three main aspects are now important to reconsider, in relation to the concept *diakonia*:³⁰

- It belongs to the nature and mission of “being church”, and its biblical and dogmatic essence, specifically its connectedness to missiological themes, needs to be rediscovered. It is not limited to professional work or agencies.
- In practice, it should be holistic, including social, mental, physical and spiritual aspects in an integrated manner.
- It inspires vigorous, prophetic actions side-by-side with the suffering and marginalised. This implies that diaconal practices transcend a “thin” description of *diakonia* as mere humble service.³¹ In fact, its biblical background indeed presents it as a bold action that announces good news for the poor and victims of natural disasters (relating to the scope of this article).³²

30 These insights are gleaned from Dietrich *et al.* (2014:2).

31 In 1990, an Australian Catholic theologian, John N. Collins, first initiated a totally new interpretation of *diakonia*. He did extensive research on the *diak*-words (*diakonia*, *diakonein* and *diakonos*) that were used in Greek literature between 400 BC and 400 AD. In his analysis, Collins rejected the idea that the Greek expression *diakonia* (exclusively) meant humble service (at the table) or caring for the sick. Instead, he offered a new explanation, asserting that the principal meaning of the concept is connected to the role of a messenger. A *diakonos* is a “go-between”, an authorised figure that acts under the service of a higher power. Thus, the term *diakonia* could refer to functionaries such as an intermediary or emissary, and to functions such as administration and ministry. Subsequently, the question was raised: Can the origin of *diakonia* as humble service (in other words, as social-caritative or caring activity) indeed be traced back to the story in Acts 6 and to the practice of the early church? Collins did not deny that sometimes the word *diakonia* may also refer to service. According to him, to identify the current social-caritative deacon with the *diakonos* in the early church is a misinterpretation. The interpretation of the *diak*- words remains a significant issue to comprehend. Multiple possibilities, however, need to be investigated responsibly and with exegetical clarity. A further exploration thereof exceeds the scope of this article. See, for example, Collins (1990) and Nordstokke (2016:147-148).

32 For a meaningful reinterpretation of *diakonia*, see Dietrich *et al.* (2014:56-58).

3. COMMON THEMES AND PRACTICES BETWEEN THE REFORMED CHURCH OF JAPAN AND THE DRC

3.1 A shared view of its missional church formation, with *diakonia* at its core

The above are some of the vast differences between Japan and South Africa and their religious landscapes. They also share many commonalities. For instance, both societies have been dramatically influenced by recent natural disasters, albeit in very different ways. Both contexts and the churches still experience considerable uncertainty and disruption after the trauma caused by earthquakes, tsunamis and floods (Japan), and by droughts and fires (South Africa).³³ These disasters severely unsettle the daily lives of individuals and communities. Their magnitude and force dislocate, injure or kill people, separate family members, and damage or destroy homes and people's lives. Indeed, disaster disruptions have multiple spiritual, emotional, economic, physical, and ecological repercussions.

Another common thread is the long-standing partnership between the RCJ and the DRC. Both these churches share a collective Reformed history and confessional basis. Over the past forty-nine years, a very close relationship and official mission co-operation have developed between the RCJ and the South African Family of Dutch Reformed Churches, facilitated via Mission Japan since 2000. This deep and enriching relationship is expanding, with mutual visits by church leaders and members, student exchanges, missionaries, volunteer outreach projects, and so on. Another (more recent) development is the mutual financial aid that has been shared between the RCJ and the DRC. This has generated multiple opportunities to share in one another's suffering and pain through various projects that were created as a result of natural disasters.

These two Reformed churches also share the fact that their church formation consists of four common dimensions, namely *leitourgia*, *kerugma*, *diakonia* and *koinonia* (in no particular order of importance or priority).³⁴ The churches' mission flows from the deep conviction that God

33 See Roberts & Ashley (2008:xv).

34 Some theologians call these dimensions "ministries of the church", through which the Holy Spirit's activity is made clear (for example, Burger [1999:203-260]; Burger & Nel [2002:267-273]). A missionary ecclesiology that firmly locates the church in the world must maintain all these dimensions in their mutual relationships, for it is in their totality that they reflect the fullness of created reality. (Paas 2013:100). It is also interesting to note that three of these aspects

is this mission's initiator (*missio Dei*) and that their calling to a holistic witness should include these dimensions. This implies:

- proclaiming the Word of God, heralding the good news of the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ (*kerugma*);³⁵
- services or acts of love and compassion that zealously strive for a just society (including ecological justice) (*diakonia*);
- deep fellowship in Christ that forms a new community of interdependence, unity and love (*koinonia*), and
- embodied worship of the Triune God through remembering, celebrating, confessing, renewed commitment, and so on (*leitourgia*).³⁶

3.2 The vital link between *diakonia* and *koinonia*

The importance of viewing the above four dimensions in an integrated manner cannot be overstated. They represent a holistic witness to the world and do not subscribe to a dualistic view of spiritual versus social. Although all four dimensions or ministries of the church are equally important and should always be viewed in an integrated way, the particular relationship between *koinonia* and *diakonia* deserves specific mention. Both are part of the total life of congregations and cannot be separated from it. The one creates the conditions in which the other can be realised.³⁷

of *kerugma* (also spelled *kerygma*), *koinonia* and *diakonia* have often been used since 1956, in the World Council of Churches' ecumenical reflection on the nature and being of the Church's apostolate (Nordstokke 2013:287).

35 Knoetze (2009:61) remarks that "the mission, the *kerugma* of the church without *diakonia* will be empty, while the *diakonia* of the church without the *kerugma* will be mute."

36 Yun (2012:30) contends that (d)iakonia in all its forms leads to *leitourgia* – service to God ... the congregation has to be guided to serve God through worship, songs of praise, thanksgiving, the confession of guilt and faith, prayers, offerings, etc. In a similar vein, Robra (1994:281) affirms that (a)n Orthodox approach to *diakonia* understands it in terms of the "liturgy after the liturgy", an extension of the holy eucharist (John 13:1-20; 1 Cor. 11:17ff.) and an expression of the unity of the church (*koinonia*) as the body of Christ.

37 Heitink (1999:278-280) highlights the fact that true *koinonia* wants to combine the anthropological and diaconal aspects of being church. Similarly, Hendriks & Ludik (1993:810) argue that [k]oinonia is of vital importance for the church. It is not only a Biblical injunction, but also, sociologically speaking, a prerequisite for the preservation of faith in the Christian community. Therefore, it is imperative that the church's ministry encourages *koinonia*. Robra (1994:285) emphasises the creative tension between *diakonia* (solidarity, struggle for justice and resistance) and *koinonia* (sharing life in community) as an essential and vital

The Kingdom of God is realised in a specific way when *diakonia* and *koinonia* combine to strengthen the church's public witness to the world. In a context such as post-apartheid South Africa, for example, the church's participation in a culturally diverse community can be viewed as help-giving and/or the advancement of projects – as a form of *diakonia*. There is the danger that this can lead to the underdevelopment or even absence of human relationships – as a form of *koinonia*.

A strong symbiosis is, therefore, necessary between involvement in social challenges (*diakonia*) and the long-term deepening of effective relationships (*koinonia*) across sociocultural boundaries.³⁸ See, for example, some initiatives of the WCC (2019) to combat these challenges. In a sense, *diakonia* demands sacrificial embodied interaction. This holds many missionary and sociological challenges for the Christian church in both South Africa and Japan.³⁹

Unexpected events such as natural disasters ironically present the body of Christ with ample opportunities to incarnate a hope-giving presence in traumatised communities. The keyword, however, remains long-term involvement that is sensitive to the relationships in the local context. The initial solidarity shown needs to be sustained and deepened through true *koinonia*.

4. HOPEFUL NEW MISSIONAL-DIACONIAL INITIATIVES

4.1 The formative potential of missional-diaconal projects after natural disasters

As mentioned earlier, climate change and huge natural disasters have influenced both contexts tremendously in recent times. In South Africa, severe droughts and fires have caused multiple crises over the past three years. This was (and still is) met with multiple interventions from the DRC's vast diaconal networks. In Japan, in the last eight years, three separate disasters, namely the North-East Japan triple disaster in 2011,

impulse for the ecumenical movement. He ultimately suggests the combined term "Sharing (*koinonia*) in Solidarity (*diakonia*)".

38 See, for example, some initiatives of the WCC (2019) to combat these challenges.

39 Hendriks & Ries (2013) describe this symbiotic relationship as a dance of the missional Kingdom of God. Knoetze (2009:50) formulates this as follows: Within the relation between *kerugma* and *diakonia* and their creative interaction, *koinonia* is formed. Without *koinonia* missional *diakonia* will not serve its purpose (building the kingdom of God), but become a mere humanistic or political activity.

the Kumamoto earthquake in 2016, and the Western Japan floods in 2018, have caused great physical and emotional harm. The disastrous after-effects are still lingering as communities are being rebuilt. Although, in many ways, physical reconstruction work has made good progress, it is vital to address the underlying spiritual and mental health challenges.⁴⁰

There have been numerous diaconal outreaches, in both contexts, to support the people in these disaster-hit areas, and to come close, listen and reach out to victims with very real, existential needs. In Japan, RCJ congregations are mostly “invisible” in their respective communities. Some of them have become much more visible and are involved in their surrounding communities. This phenomenon was strengthened by the fact that ecumenical support networks and the co-operation of various international Christian NGOs, as well as interreligious forums, formed a core part of extensive disaster relief efforts. This has also opened up new horizons on how missional-diaconal initiatives can be employed as a significant medium to evangelise, in respectful and sensitive ways, without proselytising.

Some of the mutual projects in the DRC-RCJ partnership include:

1) From the RCJ side: continual financial contributions to HIV/AIDS initiatives in South Africa (via the Mission Japan organisation) since 2000; volunteer outreaches to Sechabelo Child and Family Services (in Botshabelo township) as well as becoming part of its governing board since 2017; multiple contributions during 2017-2019 from its Synod Diaconal Action Committee after natural disasters in Knysna (mountain fires), Fraserburg, Maitland, Ysterplaat (drought) and Wuppertal (fire) – co-operating with local DRC congregations in order to alleviate, in some ways, the post-disaster distress caused.

2) From the DRC side: financial contributions via a special disaster fund for the North-East Japan Great Triple Disaster (March 2011), including the sending of missionary volunteers for several months on three different

40 Following the 2011 triple disaster, mental health challenges were among the most significant issues which survivors faced. Stress caused by dislocation, uncertainty and concern about unforeseen health issues led to behavioural changes such as poor dietary choices, lack of exercise, and sleep deprivation, all of which can have negative health consequences, including heart disease. According to Lartey & Kemp (2012:2), (p)eople who lost their homes, villages and family members, and even those who just survived the quake, tsunami and nuclear disaster, will likely continue to face mental health challenges and physical ailments associated with stress, because the majority of the damage is psychological due to grief, being relocated and living into the unknown.

occasions, resulting in the establishment of two support centers (Nozomi Centre and Sakura House in the Sendai area) which continued its work for over six years after the disasters. A special publication, recording related post-disaster work in Rikuzentakata area which is still continuing eight years after the triple disaster (earthquake, tsunami and nuclear radiation), was published in December 2018 with funds donated via Mission Japan. Other DRC contributions include the sending of volunteer groups to Kumamoto area after the April 2016 earthquake, resulting in various related church projects that are still ongoing.

These initiatives concretise the shared view of missional church formation in the longstanding DRC-RCJ partnership. It is less about short-term projects with limited outcomes, and more about building long-term ecumenical solidarity. Thus, although disaster relief is a necessary start to mutual involvements, the ultimate goal is to reflect and represent the Triune God's compassionate presence in the long run of advancing God's Kingdom across continental and cultural boundaries.

4.2 A new paradigm for holistic mission and evangelism post 11 March 2011

Serving on the RCJ synod diaconal action committee, I have experienced first-hand how the involvement of the RCJ in various diaconal ministries has increased, especially since the triple disaster of 11 March 2011 (henceforth, 3.11). This has led the church to a broadened understanding of its mission, without leaving behind the need to evangelise at appropriate times within trust relationships. Consequently, the RCJ currently incorporates, as an integral part of this missional-diaconal understanding, concrete and continued solidarity with those who experience various kinds of oppression and suffering.⁴¹

This “new” understanding of mission is not simply limited to the RCJ. The 3.11 disasters prompted Japanese churches, in general, to rethink how they engage in evangelism and church formation,⁴² and to recognise *diakonia* as a vital dimension of the *missio Dei*, rather than a mere “tool” or “aid” in evangelism. In the North-Eastern disaster areas of Japan, cases

41 This insight is gained from personal experience in these activities, and affirmed by several reports delivered (in Japanese) at the RCJ 71st general assembly meeting in Yokohama, Japan, 11-13 October 2016.

42 This assertion was affirmed at the Sixth Japan Congress on Evangelism (JCE6), 27-30 September 2016, Kobe. The congress gathered over 2,000 church leaders from all over the country, including most of the church denominations, and can be viewed as the largest gathering of its kind in Japan.

abound of people who were previously apathetic towards the gospel, but have become responsive post-3.11.

This openness came about through neither a major evangelistic campaign nor an attractive church program. Rather, people were drawn to Christianity as they saw Christ in the lives of Christian volunteers who, without demanding anything in return, kept coming to the disaster areas to provide aid and support (Konda 2017:1-2).

In fact, via their participation in voluntary support initiatives, pastors have come to understand that the extent of pastoral care, as an aspect of diakonia, is not meant to be restricted to the limits of the church, but should extend to people in society in general. It is well-known that, long after most of the volunteers ended their aid (after the first two or three years of relief aid), many Christians still visited disaster victims. Their long-term efforts – some still continuing after eight years – have led to them being called *Kirisuto-san* (in Japanese), meaning “Mr./Ms. Christ”, with respect and appreciation. Konda (2017:3) continues:

This is reminiscent of what happened in the first century. People first used the term Christian in scorn for Christ-followers, but later came to use it with respect and affection. So it is 20 centuries later in northern Japan as people see Christ in the lives of Christians.⁴³

Most of the Christians who participated in post-disaster volunteer work did not expect any favour in return. (This is a typical custom in Japan called *okaeshi*.) They did not demand suffering people to take heed of direct evangelism – so-called “unworthy proselytising”. They rather co-suffered in solidarity through multiple ministries of presence. Indeed, Konda (2017:7) accurately asserts that

the unprecedented scale of this disaster has opened the eyes of Japanese Christians to a more holistic understanding of the gospel and is stimulating a transformation in foundational church structures.

5. CONCLUSION

Over the past few years, the natural disasters in Japan and South Africa have created new opportunities for mutual *diakonia* and *koinonia*. They present new vistas on communicating the gospel, enfolded in active solidarity. They point to the core missional identity of the body of Christ, and call for compassionate words and deeds, in response to the challenges of human

43 See also Yoshida (2016:2).

suffering, as well as a renewed care for God's creation. Both the RCJ and the DRC have become much more vigilant in terms of disaster response and have initiated several plans and projects to deal with natural disasters more pro-actively.

In recent years, the concept "diaconia", embodied by missional-diaconal practices, has become more widely used in both the RCJ and the DRC. This article verified this by describing numerous examples of actual interventions that have recently taken place in the longstanding ecumenical partnership between these two churches. The DRC takes its identity and role as missional church very seriously. In light of the recent natural disasters, the significance of missional-diaconal initiatives has become more widely recognised, and this recognition is expanding the DRC's missional identity. There is a new awareness of *diakonia* as a core element of the *missio Dei* and of its potential to strengthen church formation and neighbouring communities.

The RCJ is also shifting its interpretation of the relationship between church and society. In a recent RCJ synod summary on this matter, it was formulated as follows:

Because these activities involve testifying to the Gospel through diaconal activities that are acts of love ("*ai no waza*" in Japanese) and play an important role in fulfilling our desire for the advance of the kingdom of God, we have decided to call them *mission activities through diaconal service*.⁴⁴

This is an encouraging phenomenon that helps church leaders realise the following, as one pastor claimed:

In the past I was the pastor of this church. But, now it's different. I am now this community's pastor.⁴⁵

Communicating the good news of God's loving salvation in Jesus Christ via *diakonia* transcends (but does not preclude) the proclamation of a verbal message or sharing of a biblical text. It is about an embodiment of the scope and existential meaning of the gospel message. It is about testifying to God's sustaining faithfulness amidst despair and anxiety. It echoes the age-old covenantal promise: I will continually be there where

44 Own translation as quoted from a report of the RCJ Synod Diaconal Action Committee, delivered in Japanese by its chairperson Rev. Hirotsugu Mochida at the RCJ 71st General Assembly meeting in Yokohama, Japan, 11-13 October 2016. See Mochida (2016).

45 I overheard this in conversation with RCJ pastor colleagues who worked for many years in North-Eastern Japan, post-3.11.

you are (Ex. 3:14), I will be your God even within the disorder of chaotic life events.

Reformed churches in Japan and South Africa are exploring new ways to communicate this hopeful message by encouraging and facilitating mutual projects that testify to God's loving presence and grace amidst disasters and trauma. Those who actively engage in diakonia, and in the *koinonia* that it elicits, are agents of this hope. They are to connect the act of hoping to faith and trust in God, with eyes wide open to a suffering world, because *missional-diaconal* practices are open to the cries of human suffering and the multiple ministries of Christ-like compassion that it demands. Consequently, it can be stated, as was explicated in this article, that, in this secular age, constructive *missional-diaconal* practices enhance the constructive formation of the church and its neighbouring communities.

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Keywords

Missional-diaconal

Reformed churches

Diakonia

Natural disasters

Trefwoorde

Missionaal-diakonaal

Gereformeerde kerke

Diakonia

Natuurrampe