Diaconate as Model of Ministry for Urban Locations

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Abstract

Urbanisation takes on different forms, including industrial innovation, modern architecture, new business forms, and new infrastructure. However, in many city centres, such development is accompanied by uprooting people, splitting families, identity loss, and increased poverty and health and mental complications. It is within this juxtaposition that the church is called to exercise effective ministry and mission.

The dialogical retrieval of the ministry of the deacon or diaconal ministry is both liturgical and social. The tension between the two-pronged ministry of liturgy and social responsibility makes the deacon an interlocutor for effective urban ministry.

The research investigates how the church, as an interlocutor between urbanisation and local communities, creates a safe space for meaning-making.

Keywords   Urbanisation; Deacon; Social Responsibility; Liturgy, Ecumenical Church; Interlocutor

1. Introduction

What are the original features of a diaconal ministry in urban locations and the urbanisation of areas surrounding the business centres of cities and towns? The location of this study is urban areas, in general, and the surrounding areas of the Cape Town economic centre, in particular. These areas, such as Woodstock, Salt River, Bo-Kaap, Zonnebloem and Walmer Estate, have become vibrant economic locations with an ever-growing socio-economic standard. As a result, there has been an increase in church activities and churches identifying with the Charismatic Pentecostal traditions. However, the rise of urbanisation poses several challenges to the local communities, mainly the original inhabitants of the areas, business owners of the new elite migrating communities, and expensively renovated modern buildings. Two main challenges to both traditional churches and new Charismatic and Pentecostal movements are the migration of local communities due to the high

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cost of living and the modes of ministry within evolving communities with less fixed social, cultural, and economic boundaries.

Diaconal ministry and the ministry of the deacon have traditionally included assisting with liturgy and social responsibility. The diaconal ministry has evolved, and the liturgy and social responsibility have been separated so that one is emphasised at the expense of the other. At times, the one is consumed under the other so that the diaconate is restricted to the confines of worship or the practical social aspects of mission. In the process, the depth and continuity of the ministry of the deacon and diaconal ministry are lost. An investigation into the diaconate within the Early Church critically engages with the duality of the liturgy and social ministry of the deacon.

The diaconate is part of mission, including both the ordained and the laity. Within certain traditions like Catholicism, the laity is admitted to the diaconate without formal ordination. Within the Anglican Communion, the diaconate is one of three ministerial orders and is historically integral to the mission of the church. Bosch rightly combines the ministry of the laity and that of the clergy as God's mission within the world. Keeping the ministry of laity and clergy in creative tension, Bosch (1991:474) affirms the ministry of the clergy and that of the laity; "they are the church, sent into the world."

Through dialogue with early notions of the diaconal ministry, the continuity of the liturgical and social aspects of the diaconate will be evaluated as a feasible and effective model of ministry within urban spaces and fluid communities. As an interlocutor between urbanisation and local communities, how does the church create a safe space for meaning-making?

Diaconate is a contested term, and it is used for different orders of ministry. Diaconate is also used for diverse social responsibility models within both ordained and lay ministry. A survey of the various terms – *deacon, diaconate, diaconal,* and *diakonia* – will point out the complexity of the term and the innovation accompanying the diaconate models. Prefixes such as "prophetic," "ecclesial," "public," "Trinitarian," and "transformational" attest to the newness and creativeness with which the ministry has been applied to different contexts and the relevance of the ministry throughout the centuries.

The ministry of the diaconate is formally recognised and institutionalised within mainline churches such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran traditions. While this research will draw from the historical and contemporary practices of such traditions, the informal diaconate ministry within the Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions will also be considered. Instead of using one perspective from a particular tradition, the focus will be on the ecumenical notions of the diaconate. Although the approach to the ministry of the diaconate and the conceptualisation

thereof is broad and as inclusive as possible, the objective is that the contribution of the research will stretch far beyond particular church traditions.

My methodology is a literature review of the church's historical development of diakonia as mission. The literature seeks to dialogue between the hegemony of diakonia as social responsibility and the liturgical function of the diaconate. A dialectical approach highlights the shift between social responsibility and liturgy as the core ministry of diaconate.

2. Diaconate and social responsibility

Diakonia is widely accepted as the social role of the church. Angell (2016) divides the functions of religion, including Christianity, into "*liturgia, martyria, diakonia and koinonia." Liturgia* refers to the ritual dimension, which is both the informal and formal pattern of worship. It refers to the worship service's structure, rhythm and flow and any form of liturgical acts. *Martyria* includes the testimonies and how these are communicated to society. These testimonies or witnesses include creeds and faith statements that summarise core beliefs passed down throughout the centuries. It includes creeds such as the Constantinopolitan Creed and the Nicene Creed that summarise the defence against the dispute of the nature of Jesus Christ and the Trinitarian expression of God. Whereas these two are situated within the acts of worship, the third dimension – *diakonia* – is embedded within society's social sphere, particularly the poor, widows, and marginalised. The fourth dimension – *koinonia* – concerns the community aspect of society (2016:150). Here is a clear demonstration of the discontinuity of liturgy and social praxis. The functions of Christianity and the church are placed in silos, each functioning independently. The functions of diakonia are summarised by Angell (2016:151) as an *innovator, improver, value guardian,* and *service provider*. There is no reference to the deacon's assistance to the presider or the interconnection between the gathering for worship and the scattering for service in the world.

According to Knoetze (2019:152), "The ministry of *diaconia* is interrelated with the other ministries, such as *kerygma* and *koinonia*. *Kerygma* means 'news, declaration, decree, and announcement.' *Koinonia* means 'participation, impartation or fellowship'" (italics in the original). Knoetze develops a Trinitarian model called *Diakonia Trinitatis Dei,* which is three-pronged and refers to the Trinitarian communion of the Father creating humans to be in koinonia (relation); the Son announcing (kerygma) the coming of the Kingdom and the healing of the world; and The Holy Spirit empowering the poor for agency (2019:152-158). The Father does not only share in communion with the creatures, but also shares in the creation of the rest of creation. "The biblical narratives of creation announce God's good will for everything and everyone that God has called into being. Creation not

only refers to what God did in the beginning; it is a continuous process (c*reatio continua*) of upholding and renewing life. In the stories of creation, the creation of humankind is unique: only the man and the woman are created in God's image, capacitated to assume the vocation to be God's co-workers in caring for creation" (World Council of Churches, 2017:43). Although Knoetze does not provide a detailed and comprehensive model of diakonia, the innovative use of the Trinitarian doctrine provides crucial markers for a model of diakonia of interdependent ministries of the church for more effective service. Knoetze's model also provides critical points of engagement with a narrow focus on diakonia as social praxis. Nordstokke (2012) observes that the Trinitarian model of diakonia has its theological origins in the ecumenical movement. In *Mission in Context,* Tsele, as cited by Nordstokke, refers to mission as three dimensions, namely God's mission as creation, redeemer, and sanctifier. Nordstokke develops a model of diakonia as empowerment which is the sharing of power by God with humans in reference to the workings of the Holy Spirit and the witness of Jesus Christ to the unconditional love of God (2012:190). Like Knoetze, Nordstokke does not merge diakonia with any other ministries, and more specifically, not with the liturgy of the church in his quest to develop empowerment as a model of diakonia. The focus is exclusively on the social practices of the church.

The Trinitarian model of diakonia is based on the traditional doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Such an approach aligns with the doctrine that has provided theological notions of the identity of humans, other living beings, and non-living beings. This model of diakonia repositions humanity as a less dominant and exploitative force of God's creation. The earth and the rest of God's creation are not merely viewed from an anthropological perspective. The rest of God's creation is not to be exploited for the enjoyment of humanity. "On the contrary, God gives a special responsibility to all humankind to care as stewards for God's creation. Diaconal action affirms the vocation and seeks to provide opportunities for being partners in God's mission" (Nordstokke, 2009:27). Here is evidence of a critical look at the widely used verbs "subdue" and "dominion" in relation to the calling of humanity by God in the Genesis narrative.

The absolute uniqueness of humans that this approach bases its perception of diakonia on is questioned in the contemporary situation that is marked by the unprecedented and almost irredeemable destruction of the environment, the extinction of species, including the human species, the widening gap between the wealthy and the poor, high levels of toxic gas emissions, and exploitative consumption of meat and sea life.

While the debate about the doctrine of the *imago Dei* and development has taken a more critical turn with the introduction of the vocation and calling that is connected

with the identity of the person, the Trinitarian diakonia model has been less critical of the traditional doctrine of what it means to be human. With regard to the former, de Gruchy relates Genesis 1:27, 2:7 with Genesis 1:28, 2:15 to illustrate that identity is both about the image or likeness of God and the calling or vocation that goes with the creation of persons (Haddad, 2015:70). Horan (2019) is more critical than de Gruchy and claims that it is not only persons who are unique but also other forms of the created order. Horan asserts that tradition is not confined to the past; it is meaning-making in the present when embedded in the lived experience and actual reality. A renewed look at the doctrine of the *imago Dei* elicits different notions of what it means to be a person when we are able to reimagine the creation narrative in spatial and not linear time. Horan (2019:140-41) asserts that "a renewed sense of the text provides an unexpected resource for recalling our origins and recognising the kingship of creation. For example, there are numerous parallels presented and continuity seen between human beings and non-human creation within the narrative." Horan uses a creative, imaginative symbol for the reproduction of a picture. By repainting a picture, the artist accepts that there will be some differences from the original. A further reproduction from the second version will have even more distinct differences. However, even the third version will resemble the first one and represent enough of the original one to be in its image. The following quotation sums up the complexity of the traditional, fixed doctrine of the *imago Dei* within the diaconal ministry of the 21st century. "Bonature conceives of each aspect of the created order as bearing something like a 'footprint' (*vestigium*) of the Divine, a particular imprint of that which is the source of the thing's very existence. Because all creatures have an intrinsic relationship to God as *principium creativum*, every creature is therefore a vestige" (2019:108). The principle is not that every creature is precisely the same and possesses some kind of essentialism, but the deviation from the original is the space of inclusivity in distinctiveness. The original picture becomes the norm because, without it, the copy does not have the same meaning, but in the same manner, the copy has different features or at least amended features. The distinctiveness of human beings from other living or non-living beings and the differences of humans amongst themselves places humans and other parts of God's creation in a relationship that is not best described by domination, subduement or stewardship, but rather by interdependence. This interdependence is not so much part of the liberal and neo-liberal economic policies that dominate urbanisation. The liturgy of Christian worship, of which the deacon is the leader, connects the visible and invisible world so that their material resources do not determine the identity of the people, but by their nourishing of both spiritual and matter within a non-dualistic way.

The Lutheran World Federation's (LWF) document, *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, and Empowerment,* provides a useful glimpse

into the ecumenical discussion about the relationship between works and liturgy within the framework of diakonia. Drawing from the 6th century monk St Benedict's rule of life, "*Ora et labora*" (to pray is to work), the importance of spirituality is linked to diakonia as an interdependent variable. Diakonia and spirituality enhance each other. "Most elements of the liturgy have a clear diaconal dimension. When the sacraments are administered correctly (*Confessio Augusta V1*), they are vehicles of grace and of diaconal identity, both in the life of the individual Christian and in the life of the communion" (Nordstokke, 2009:37). The position of this fundamental aspect of the early patristic views and perspectives of the diaconate is a starting point for a dialogue with the different directions that the diaconal ministry has taken over the centuries. It is placed within the document as part of the broader discussion about "The identity of diakonia." However, the discussion is dominated by "good works," and spirituality enhances the social aspect of diakonia.

Nordstokke (2014, 2016, 2019) does not give substantial attention to the liturgical ministry of the diaconate. However, his expertise in diakonia is widely accepted in the parts of Europe where diakonia forms an integral part of the church and educational institutions, particularly at VID Specialized University, Norway, and he plays a leading role within the LWF's vast diaconal resources. The social praxis dominates his diaconal perspectives, including his developing empowerment and Trinitarian and prophetic models of diakonia.

Knoetze and Nordstokke make very intelligible contributions to the assessment of the diaconate ministry to communities and individuals affected by urbanisation. The critique of the uniqueness of human beings, the theological notions of Trinity, *imago Dei*, and calling and vocation through dialogue retrieves the interdependency of perceived antagonistic views of what it means to be human, created in the image and likeness of God, and the relationship between humans and other forms of God's creation.

The reinterpretation of the creation narrative rejects the role of humans to subdue, be good stewards, or have dominion. The creation narrative is not about the plot of the human being's placement as the pinnacle of God's creation. Nor is the plot about the absolute and sole uniqueness of the human being. The creation narrative is about the interconnectedness of all creation within an ongoing, imaginative, and transforming movement from and towards God. As much as the Trinitarian diaconal model contributes towards a theological perspective of a diakonia from below and the enhancement of the agency of the poor, widows and marginalised, the critique of the traditional doctrine of the *imago Dei* contributes to a radical new power relation between humans and non-human beings. The power relationship needs reshaping and redirecting within an ongoing shift towards the agency of the poor and the marginalised.

These critiques of the traditional essentialist narrative of creation are taken seriously when the social praxis is linked with the liturgical movements and rhythms of the church's worship. It is within the connection of liturgy and social praxis that diaconal moves beyond either the perception of the spiritual and material or the liturgical and social. It is not within the difference or the separation of the liturgy and social responsibility that diakonia is meaning-making, but within the continuous and the symbolic that the poor, widows and marginalised find that their agency is authentic and depicted as transformative.

The theological notions of diakonia of the Early Church and the few centuries preceding the patristic age provide frameworks for effective ministerial practices and service within urban locations and locations that have undergone urbanisation.

3. Urbanisation: Locus for diaconate

Swart and de Beer (2014) highlight a gap in the growing influential public theology discourse in the South African theology landscape as a lack of embeddedness in a comprehensive contextual urban reality. They contend that despite the theological vigour with which public theology has received attention, it fails to engage and respond to the urban public (2014:1). To emphasise their criticism, Swart and de Beer quote from the South African National Planning Commission (NPC):

> South Africa's towns and cities are now home to more than 60 percent of the national population and account for 80 percent of economic activity … with these percentages expected to increase. The future of the urban centres is of enormous importance to national development. ... It is possible that by 2025, the country's urban areas will be bigger, poorer, more congested, more polluted and more socially fractious (NPC n.d., cited by Swart & de Beer, 2014:1).

As a minister of a community in Walmer Estate, an urban area on the boundary of the Cape Town city centre, I have witnessed the rapid growth in economic activity, rising of exclusive boutiques, businesses, expensive residential apartment blocks, and a diminishing original residential community – the surrounding areas of Woodstock, Salt River, and Maitland. These were once vibrant communities with residents consisting of families living in the areas for generations. More recently, families have had to vacate these once cherished neighbourhoods because of the high rise in the cost of living, the influx of people moving closer to their workplaces, the surge in the homelessness of people who moved from rural areas to work in these new economic hubs, and the escalation of substance abuse and crime.

My own experience and that of the communities, such as Walmer Estate, are linked to the concerns raised by the NPC, as stated by Swart and de Beer. These

scholars rightly seek to address the gap in public theology "with this special collection of articles … to inspire and set an agenda for doing a mode of public theology in South Africa that is intentionally preoccupied with the context of the urban and that, in this process, strives to contribute from the part of theological scholarship to the counterpoint in scholarly production on the urban both in the context of South African and international scholarship" (Swart & de Beer, 2014:2). This special collection has made significant contributions to public theology and its embeddedness in the urban city contexts. My own contribution lies within missiology and the specific role that the church plays in rapidly changing urban spaces. Drawing from the diaconate as it is used in the history of the church to address situations and spaces of rapid change and a narrow development agenda, the diaconate is a wholistic approach to the needs of people who are affected by forced removals, uprooting of histories, wiping out of narratives, and pastoral neglect. Missiology's focus is the church as an agent within the regeneration movement. Within this missionary quest, the complexity of diakonia is acknowledged as a term with many variations within different formal and informal ministerial spheres. The use of diakonia in the narrow sense of social responsibility has been particularly emphasised in both the ecumenical contributions and the denominational practices of diakonia. Retrieval of the Early Church's diaconate ministry through dialogue assumes a more holistic diaconate that keeps liturgy and social praxis in creative tension within a continuous movement of prayer as work and work as prayer.

Urbanisation, like diakonia, is a complex phenomenon, and it is not without contestations – both as a concept and a practice. Terms such as "urban renewal," "urban development," urban revitalisation," urban reconstruction," and "urban renaissance" are used to describe the transformation or upscaling of urban areas that have gone through some degree of decay. "Gentrification" is another concept that is commonly used for the process of improvement or development of urban areas. Both processes are usually done through capitalist or neo-capitalist exchanges, resulting in a few becoming richer and the majority becoming poorer (Klaasen, Louw & Muller, 2021:164). Within the context of the surrounding areas of the Cape Town city centre, areas such as Woodstock, Salt River and the Bo-Kaap (de Beer, 2018:1-2) are the most well-known areas. These areas have become two kinds of communities within the once-peaceful community. Headley (2018:1) refers to these two communities as "two faces to the city of Cape Town" – the one known for its world-class attractions such as mountains, forests, beaches and restaurants, and the other identified by its densely populated structures, deprivation, and marginalisation.

Within these fast-changing spaces of urban renewal and migration of societies, the church reimagines her role as a missionary instrument of God and the *missio*

Dei. The koinonia is not the once consistent community that resided within the confines of the parish boundaries. The church community is scattered according to the trends and patterns of urban renewal. The rhythm of the koinonia (gathering of the people) is influenced by the business hours, modes of trade and types of services, and employment that accompanies gentrification. These new sociological and geographical trends cannot diminish the sacramental church, whose mission is holistic and not confined to patterns outside the boundaries of the vocation and calling of the order of ministries. Sociological and economic trends impact the social, biological, and spiritual well-being of communities and individuals. The diaconate of the Early Church has traces of comprehensive ministries that include both social and spiritual. The dualism of the dominant Western worldview that is the lens for liberal and neo-liberal economics is countered by the integrated healing of the African worldview.

The diaconal ministry has been part of the church's ministry since the inception of the informal church gatherings of the 1st century. The communities described in the Acts of the Apostles, and later within the institutional form of the church, have been served by lay and later ordained deacons. The ministry of these ministers was not limited to the sacraments nor what it solely embedded in the social responsibilities towards the weak, widows, sick, and the poor. The diaconate of the liturgy and service provides a model of mission that is both prophetic and servanthood.

4. Early church diakonia

The diaconate of the first three centuries was the most visible and vibrant era of the diaconal ministry within Christian history. However, the format of the ministry of the deacon differed within the Apostolic Fathers' writings from the centrality of the liturgy within the context of the bishop and the eucharist (Didache) and in 1. Clement's exposition of the deacon as servants within the liturgical responsibilities. Bishop Ignatius is the foremost proponent of the latter. There is a slightly different focus within the writings of The Shephard of Hermas at the beginning of the 2nd century. Here deacons are within the order of ministry that takes responsibility for the social aspect. The ministry includes caring for widows, the poor, and orphans. From the late 4th century, the deacons were associated with the Levites, and their responsibility was ministry to the bishop. Within these writings of the Apostolic Constitutions lies the clearest evidence of the diaconal ministry as both liturgical and social.

> According to the Apostolic Constitutions, the deacon assists the bishop in many different ways: to carry messages, to travel about, to serve, in doing home visits, minister to the sick, in celebrating the Eucharist, helping at baptism and saying prayers. For in-

stance, after the Eucharist the deacon must pray for the whole Church and the peace of the universe (2.57). Characteristically deacons are often mentioned in contexts that have to do with the unity of the Church (Christensen, 2019:44-45).

The diaconate of the Early Church also included women. Evidence is found as early as Romans 16:1, where Phoebe is mentioned as a church deacon in Cenchreae, likening deaconesses to the Holy Ghost in the Apostolic Constitutions. Examples of 5th century deaconesses are Olympias from Constantinople, Elisanthia, Martyria and Palladia, ordained by John Chrysostom (Christensen, 2019:46-47). It could be argued that because deaconesses did not enjoy the public or liturgical role as deacons and the move towards transitional diaconate, the gap between the liturgical and social nature of the diaconal ministry widened. The Protestant Reformation introduced a re-emergence of the diaconal ministry, focusing almost entirely on charity and emergency interventions. The 19th century saw an intensifying of this focus, and within Europe and in Germany in particular, the diaconate was the same as caritative service. Within the mainline churches, such as the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church, the ministry of the diaconate has become a permanent ministerial order, and the liturgical and social aspects of diaconal ministry are practised as two parts of the same ministry (Klaasen, 2020:123).

Diaconate ministry is the space to bring the visible and invisible world of the communities affected by urbanisation or gentrification into dialogue. By invisible world, I refer to the spaces where worshippers are symbolically pointed within the liturgy context. The presence of the deacon at the Lord's supper, the reading of the gospel and the sending out into the world present a transcendence of the alienation of the community. These ritualistic movements transform the limited and perceived hopelessness of the local community in the face of powerful economic drivers.

The movement from the community to worship, and then from worship to the community, engulfs the mysticism of the proclamation of the gospel from the lived experience of the community; the Eucharist is the transformation of the material (bread and wine) into the spiritual and the sending out at the end of worship. Within these three rituals, the deacon is the interlocutor between the community and God, the physical and the spiritual, and the liturgical and the social.

"It is this movement from urbanization and its effects on communities to the hope of healing and restoring that is led by the deacon. The distinctive role of the deacon is connecting the social work and responsibility with the spiritual … As interlocutor, the deacon adds to the technical and human skills the ritual and symbolic meanings of the spaces that undergird the social cohesion and cultural dimensions of the people" (Klaasen et al., 2021:174).

This specific role distinguishes the diaconate from the professional skills limited to the physical and the secular. It is this connection and interactionist process of liturgy and social praxis that the original ministries of the deacon within the first five centuries add another dimension to the prophetic ministry of the church. It is a ministry that redefines the identity of individuals in the local community and critically engages with the dominant and exploitative power of unjust economic practices and policies.

The dialogical mode of interaction between the diaconal ministry and the traditional doctrinal formulation of the doctrine of the *imago Dei* provides space for the deeper identity of the local community. The dialogue confronts the rigid, unchanging and fixed identity of what it means to be human. These fixed identities are entrenched by the marginalisation of the local community from the migrant community of people and buildings. The deacon, as interlocutor, invites the community into the transforming space of worship. It is within the worship and through the liturgy that the worth of the community is restored and their calling and vocation affirmed. This mystical moment is what is described as "the diakonia of God: A diakonia of liberation as well as restoring dignity, and ensuring justice and peace" (World Council of Churches, 2013:106-107).

The community's identity is also entangled in the vocation and calling. Diaconal ministry is a calling and vocation as depicted in the Early Church's structures. This call was formalised in the deacon's ordination of the three-fold order of the bishop, priest, and deacon. The deacon, as a member of the community and representative of the community and its needs, performs a call – a prophetic call – and teaches and nurtures the vocation of the community. Nordstokke's (2019:37) application of the four marks of God's grace, holiness, unity, catholicity, and apostolicity reaffirms the mission of the church as the "messianic sending of Jesus that also marks the being of the church ... responsible for instituting the life of the church, its model of sharing and mutual care, with its mandate to holistic mission … apostolicity also means a constant reminder of the healing and liberating dimensions of the ministry of Jesus … he criticized the powerful, unmasking their hypocrisy and prejudice."

5. Conclusion

Urbanisation, or in its extreme form, gentrification, is an innovative form of development on the surface. Many communities benefit from upscaling trade, employment opportunities, and new modern buildings, attracting investors and financial generation. However, when such innovations and development are done without the active participation of the local community, then displacements increase in social problems such as homelessness, crime, poverty, and loss of identity, outweighing economic development.

The church is a central agent within communities where such gentrification has taken place. The ministry of the church has the potential to heal broken communities and add to the skills of businesses and other secular institutions through human capital, spiritual capital, and easy-flowing infrastructure, such as institutional management structures. Diakonia of the Early Church has been investigated as a model of diaconal ministry within fluid, migrating and marginalised communities. The creative tension of the liturgical and social ministry of the deacon provides a dialogical movement of spiritual, social, worship, and work, which provides the space (mystical space) for a more profound sense of the meaning of identity, restoring of human dignity, and renewed call of the vocation of the local community.

This dialogue between the Early Church's diaconal ministry of liturgy and service provides tools for a re-imaginative model of ministry that will confront the dominant power of liberal and neo-liberal economics through prophetic witness, and it identifies means to add to a meaningful and just mission. This mission, exemplified within the ministry of the deacon, provides skills and gifts that the church can offer to enhance the personhood of every individual and community within the boundary of communities experiencing urbanisation. The deacon as interlocutor provides the space for just development.

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