

Bishop Atle Sommerfeldt:

Response: The eye of the storm – perspective from the church

Dean Skauge has shown how integrated diakonia is in the vision and the strategies of the Church of Norway. Diakonia is not a task the church performs, but a dimension of the church. There is now a Christian church without diakonia. Dean Skauge also underlined an holistic understanding of diakonia which is rooted in Scripture and the history of the church through 2000 years. Diakonia includes compassion and mercy, justice and peace, protection and cultivation of nature and the creation. And he has underlined that diakonia is a joint mission for the global church, accompanying each other and defining common issues to address.

Dean Skauge underlined climate change as a major joint challenge for the global church and global community that can only be met by common action and reflection.

Let me bring you back to your last conference in Moshi in July 2011. From Moshi, you could observe the declining ice cap on Kilimanjaro – one of the most visible signs of the climate-change and the climate-crisis. We know that without political change, living conditions of hundreds of million of people will be dramatically changed. Increased poverty, uprooted people migrating from their roots, and deep social conflicts will be the result of inadequate action.

The church is sent to the world to be sign of another reality, as Ann Wren reminded us yesterday. It is such a sign of hope when the churches and other faith-communities are deeply involved in the struggle for a just climate agreement in Paris in December this year. Here in northern Europe the churches, together with the global ACT-alliance, have launched a pilgrimage for climate justice, from Svalbard to Paris.

The churches are renewing a traditional spirituality, not walking to one holy place, but walking from holy place to holy place in God's holy nature to reach the goal and to address the powerful and responsible authority.

These holy places are mostly church buildings, eyes in the storms in local communities, many of them for 1000 years, carrying the testimonies of generations seeking shelter in the storms.

This pilgrimage also renews another deeply rooted spiritual tradition, the tradition of hospitality. The churches are giving space to the concerned people who want to give a message to the powerful and responsible.

During your stay in Moshi four years ago, we experienced here in Norway an unthinkable act of terrorism by a racist right wing actor. 77 people were killed, many more wounded and most of us traumatized. In that moment, the Church of Norway became the refuge for almost all Norwegians. The sanctuaries were opened. In the cathedral of Oslo alone, 20% of Norway's population enjoyed the hospitality of the church.

People knew where to go, and the church was ready to care for everybody – even for those not comfortable to enter the church, but who chose to leave their rose outside.

The everyday ministry of accompanying people in grief - 90% of Norwegians are buried by The church of Norway – was unfolded for the whole nation. The serving church got a renewed meaning.

Last week the people in USA witnessed a racist terror attack in the sanctuary of a church. Killings of people in sanctuaries – like the killing of archbishop Romero, the slaughter of people in the sanctuaries in Rwanda and terrorist attacks on mosques, churches, temples and synagogues are exposing evil in a particular awful way because it is attacks on people seeking shelter from the storm..

President Obama did one of the eulogies and expressed the role a serving – diaconal - church has to people experiencing storms:

“Over the course of centuries, black churches served as “hush harbors” where slaves could worship in safety; praise houses where their free descendants could gather and shout hallelujah, rest stops for the weary along the Underground Railroad; bunkers for the foot soldiers of the Civil Rights Movement. They have been, and continue to be, community centers where we organize for jobs and justice; places of scholarship and network; places where children are loved and fed and kept out of harm’s way, and told that they are beautiful and smart --

and taught that they matter. That's what happens in church....A sacred place, this church. Not just for blacks, not just for Christians, but for every American who cares about the steady expansion -- of human rights and human dignity in this country; a foundation stone for liberty and justice for all. That's what the church meant. " And we will add, not only for the people of America, but for all people in our common, global village.

Obama reflects in this statement the experiences and the expectations by people in the storm.

It is the expectation that we are accompanying people on their pilgrimage through life.

It is the expectation that we will receive them as they are, comfort them in their needs and struggle with them in their battles with forces of dominion and destruction.

They expect the church to give sign of the Kingdom of God, signs of heaven, in their lives.

When the World Council of Churches calls all of us to participate in a pilgrimage for peace and justice, which includes climate justice , accompaniment of and hospitality for people in crisis, and empowerment of the marginalised, it is a contemporary answer to those expectations people have of us and that Obama expresses on their behalf.

Throughout the history of the church, God has raised up specialised ministries to realise this accompanying and hospitable mission of the church. It started with the desert fathers and mothers who established the first hospitals and shelters in the second Half of the 4.th century, as a response to hunger, epidemics, spiritual longing and war. Tensions between these specialised ministries and the church hierarchies as well as different forms of alliance building with the state, are an integral part of this history, well known also today. The church depended on these ministries as part of her mission, the ministries are depending on the church in order to be rooted in God's mission and not in their own performance.

Let me end with a comment on the laws of nature and God's mission in response to Rev Tomrens position referred to by Dean Skauge. Nature is ruled by natural laws which science tells us secure the survival of the fittest. We know from our recent European history that when this law is transferred to human societies, the result is catastrophic. In our contemporary, global society the survival of the fittest takes the form in our country as a demand for perfection and competitiveness in all spheres of lives. The results are symptoms of anxiety and depression among the youth and the elderly, also here in Norway. Men above 70 have the highest risk of committing suicide.

The quest for grace and a space with acceptance is present in our society and may be heard as a silent cry for mercy.

The church is a sign of another reality- a reality where God accepts people not on the basis of merit, but on the basis of grace. This act of grace is seen when people are received and baptised with the same ritual regardless of class, gender or culture, and when people receive a simple meal with the same portion in bread and wine, making visible the presence of God in our midst. The sacramental reality of the church is that God is visible with grace as the ultimate hospitality. That is the foundation of the church as a reliable shelter for people.

The church is the eye of storm and present in the storm. That is a church in diakonia.