

# Reframing African Ecumenical Development Discourse: Case of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) 2000–2018 (Part 2)

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## Abstract

This research explores the contribution of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) to ecumenical development discourse against the background of contemporary debates on the role of religion in development. It focuses on the period 2000–2008. Through a critical review of the AACC's engagement in development, the article offers an appraisal of the AACC's socio-economic justice approach to development. It also highlights the AACC's most recent appropriation of diakonia in its programmatic thrust on development. While such appropriation holds promise for an approach to development rooted in theological ideas, it begs further reflection on the place of local epistemologies of development in African ecumenical discourse. Arguing for the translation of diakonia, this research proposes the decolonial reframing of African churches' engagement in development.

**Keywords:** All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC); diakonia; ecumenical movement and development; religion and development; religious social capital; theology and development

## Introduction

Since the turn of the 21st century, there has been a surge of interest on the nexus between religion and development (Deneulin and Bano 2009; Olivier 2016; Rakodi 2012; Ter Haar and Ellis 2006). Some observers describe this recent attention as a “turn to religion” in development studies, policy, and practice (Tomalin, Hausteine, and Kidy 2019, 106). The multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary nature of these recent debates on religion and development lends the discourse towards the decolonisation of both religious discourse on development, and on discourses of development. Given the colonial legacies of development and religious (theological) studies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni



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2012), such decolonisation is important for development practice and knowledge production on religion and development. Within the ecumenical movement, the question of the role of faith communities (churches and faith-based organisations) in development is a perennial issue, particularly in ecumenical discourse on social ethics—at least since the 1960s. Therefore, against the background of wider ecumenical development discourse, this qualitative research explores recent ecumenical discourse on diakonia and development in the context of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). The AACC is one of the most significant ecumenical structures in Africa that was officially inaugurated in 1963 as a fellowship of churches. Its headquarters are located in Nairobi, Kenya. The AACC has a membership of 183 churches in 42 African countries and 24 National Councils of Churches as associate members. In its current configuration, the AACC serves as “an ecumenical instrument facilitating synergy amongst its member churches, with the people of Africa” (AACC 2018, iii).

The focus of this research on the AACC is significant; not least because of its longstanding involvement in addressing developmental issues from a decidedly ecclesial perspective. These include the role of the church in addressing issues of conflicts and civil wars, democracy, Africa’s debt burden, health, gender, HIV/AIDS, poverty, the environment, and the refugee problem. The AACC has arguably provided visibility of churches at international and ecumenical forums. Further, it has served as a platform for the exchange and development of theological ideas on the continent for both its member churches and the African theological academy. As a sequel to my previous article on the AACC’s discourse on development for the period 1963–2013, this contribution is concerned with the theological underpinnings of recent discourse on development within the context of the AACC. It specifically offers an appraisal of the AACC’s appropriation of diakonia in its programmatic arrangement. Theoretically, this research is framed within the context of recent discourse on religion and development in general, and ecumenical debates on theology and development in particular. It entails a critical review of data on the AACC in light of recent debates on the nexus of religion and development. Given the different approaches, understandings and ideas about what the term development means, and changes in development thinking and practice (see Deneulin and Rakodi 2011, 48; Rakodi 2012, 638), I will employ the term development to generally refer to well-being. Considering the many definitional debates on the category of religion,<sup>1</sup> this author understands religion as a multilevel phenomenon (see Sakupapa 2019, 109). Further, I follow Ter Haar’s (2011, 11) use of the term religion to refer to “the belief in the existence of an invisible world that is distinct from the visible one but not separate from the visible one.” The overarching theoretical framework in which this research is framed is the view underscored by Ter Haar (2011,

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1 Religion has often been defined in either functionalist or ontological terms. Some fear that some definitions are too capacious and that the term “religion” may lose its analytic usefulness. This concern is addressed by Kevin Schilbrack, who defines religion as “forms of life predicated upon the reality of the superempirical” in his 2013 article “What isn’t Religion?” *The Journal of Religion* 93 (3): 291–318.

5), namely that both religion and development are “visions of how the world may be transformed.”

This article is organised into four sections. The first section offers a brief overview of the recent interest in the role of religion in development, and highlights the nexus of religion and development. The second section will situate the AACC within the broader ecumenical theology of development, with specific reference to voices from the Third World. In the third section, a case study of the AACC (2000–2018) explores the AACC’s engagement in development as diakonia, and discusses diakonia as advocacy for socio-economic justice and peace. The fourth section deliberates local congregations as subjects of diakonia. This article endeavours to delineate the AACC’s recent engagement in development as diakonia and will offer a decolonial critique of the AACC’s recent trajectory on development.

## The Nexus of Religion and Development

Until recently, religion had been largely occluded in mainstream development thinking and practice (see Ver Beek 2000, 36). The modernisation theory, and most particularly the secularisation thesis—with its assumption that religion would retreat into the private sphere in the face of economic development and modernisation—partly contributed to the “invisibility of religion” in the mainstream Western discourse on development (Rakodi 2012, 638). The growing importance of religion in the public sphere in much of sub-Saharan Africa lends credence to the scholarly disapproval of the secularisation thesis. In many African contexts, religion remains a significant factor in social life and undeniably shapes people’s “worldviews and social institutions” (Rakodi 2012, 622). Perceived to pervade all aspects of life, religion is thus interpreted as being integral to the African understanding of the world and the place of humanity in it (Ver Beek 2002, 60). In this vein, religion in Africa is often construed as part of the African holistic worldview. Thus put, I do not imply a romantic view of Africa as homogenous. Nevertheless, many argue that in most African contexts, religion is widely recognised as a fundamental social, political and development force (Bompani 2015, 100) and thus considered to be an integral aspect of public culture (Englund 2011, 8; Sakupapa 2019, 109). Ellis and Ter Haar (2004, 4) contend that “it is largely through religious ideas that Africans think about the world today, and that religious ideas provide them with a means of becoming social and political actors.” In this sense, religion is “a mode of apprehending reality” for many Africans (Ellis and Ter Haar 2007, 387; c.f. Deneulin and Rakodi 2011, 46).

With the failure of the secularisation thesis as highlighted above, the turn of the 21st century witnessed a surge of interest in the role of religion in development (Deneulin and Bano 2009, 14; Deneulin and Rakodi 2011; Ter Haar and Ellis 2006; Olivier 2016). Bompani (2019, 173–177) traces the emergence and establishment of sub-disciplines of religion and development and succinctly maps several trajectories in the literature on religion and development. In some analyses on the religion and development nexus, attention is focused on conceptual and methodological issues, with a view to developing

an analytical framework for analysing the links between religion and development (Noy 2009; Rakodi 2012, 644–346). For purposes of this research, I am interested in the question regarding the distinctive contribution of religion to development. This concern is framed in the context of analyses on the public role of religion and the attention that such discourses place on the role of religion in shaping worldviews, values and behaviour (Deneulin and Bano 2009, 6). Ter Haar and Ellis (2006, 356) argue that religious resources “produce knowledge that, in principle, could be beneficial to a community for development purposes.” For Ter Haar (2011, 8), such knowledge is best illuminated in light of her categorisation of religious resources into four strands, namely “religious ideas (beliefs); religious practices (ritual behaviour); religious organisations; and religious experience.” Others have researched the implications of religious belief and religiosity for development. However, the assumption that religion has a positive role in development is also subject to critical scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> This is inevitable, not least because of the ambivalence of religion. As Deneulin and Bano (2009, 15–16) observe, examples of the potential of some religious beliefs and practices to impede development are not difficult to find:

In many societies, women are prohibited by religious decrees from working outside the home; religion is often a cause of sectarian and communal violence ... religion appears to be undermining basic human rights ... the rising tide of religion-based militancy witnessed internationally pushes the destructive potential of religion to the forefront.

The above notwithstanding, the positive role of religion in development is widely underscored. Some accentuate the role of religion in terms of social capital formation (Sakupapa 2018b; Swart 2006b).<sup>3</sup> However, this still begs further reflection on the “uniquely religious contributions of religious communities in social capital formation” (Wepener et al. 2010, 67). This is particularly crucial in Christian theological and ecumenical development discourses, given the role of doctrine and practices amongst Christian churches—whatever form these may take. This begs several questions. Wherein lies the specific contribution of the churches in development? Is this to be located in their theologies, liturgies or the religious social capital that they produce? Amongst other scholars of religion and development, Swart (2017, 247) partly attends to these questions by identifying and probing the extent to which religious ritual could be valued as a source of social capital formation (c.f. Wepener et al. 2010).<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I will explore recent ecumenical development discourse in the context of the AACC as a case study to explore the distinctive contribution of religious organisations in development. While appreciative of Ter Haar’s (2011) categorisation of religious resources, I argue that these are not mutually exclusive, at least in the context of

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2 See for instance the contribution to the July 2012 special double issue of *Development in Practice*.

3 See also Smidt, Corwin. 2003. *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*. Waco: Baylor University Press.

4 See also Wepener, Cas, and Johan Cilliers. 2010, “Ritual and the Generation of Social Capital in Contexts of Poverty.” In *Religion and Social Development in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Perspectives for Critical Engagement*, edited by Ignatius Swart, Hermann Rocher, Sulina Green and Johannes Erasmus, 417–430. Stellenbosch: Sun Press.

ecumenical discourse. By so doing, I am mindful of analyses on religion and development that foreground individual agency and lived faith experience (see Ter Haar 2011) and will draw on these in my critique of ecumenical discourse. To place my analysis in perspective, I will first offer a brief overview of ecumenical discourse on development with specific reference to the contributions from the Third World in this regard.

## An Ecumenical Theology of Development: Voices from the Third World

The ecumenical development discourse reaches back to the 1960s and one may by implication draw precedents in the 19th century missionary movement. It is crucial to recall that the missionary movement was the springboard of the ecumenical movement. During the missionary era, development efforts were intertwined with the civilising mission. The missionary movement thus wittingly or unwittingly contributed towards the ideological rationalisation of colonialism. The legacy of the Christian civilising mission found specific expression in the areas of health and education. In the post-colonial period in Africa, this legacy was bequeathed to mainline Protestant churches of missionary origins, most of whom are members of one of the most significant ecumenical structures in Africa, namely the AACC. On the other hand, the ecumenical movement adopted a posture of critical engagement with the modernist paradigm of development of the post-World War II period, at least since the 1960s. In this regard, about five contexts may be identified in the history of wider ecumenical development discourse.

The first explicit treatment of the theme of development was at the World Council of Churches (WCC) conference on church and society held in Geneva in 1966. The other contexts include: the WCC Uppsala Assembly (1968); the Committee on Society Development and Peace (SODEPAX) consultation on “In Search of a Theology of Development” held in Cartigny; the WCC consultation on development projects held in Montreux, Switzerland in 1970; and the establishment in 1970 of the WCC’s Commission on the Churches’ Participation in Development. The history and significance of these developments are so well researched that it suffices to merely list them here (see APRODEV 2008, 18–21; Dickinson 2004; Itty 1974; Sakupapa 2018b, 3–5; Swart 2006a, 84–87). Ecumenical debates that evolved out of the above-mentioned contexts were critical of the narrow focus of economic growth models of development; underpinned as they were by modernisation theory. The critique of the hitherto dominant Rostowian model of development was a legacy of voices from the Third World, such as the Indian economist Samuel Parmar and renowned Indian theologian and ecumenical leader, M. M. Thomas (see Athyal 2016, 12–13). Parmar was particularly influential in the WCC Montreux consultation’s naming of social justice, self-reliance and economic growth as inter-related objectives of development.

Since the 1970s, liberation theology insisted on the inseparability of praxis and reflection, and articulated God’s preferential option for the poor and oppressed. Recognising the influence of Marxist thought on theological reflection in terms of

“transformation of this world and of the action of man [sic] in history,” the Peruvian Catholic theologian and father of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez (1973, 9), argued that theology is critical reflection on praxis. Accordingly, Gutierrez insisted that liberation expresses better “the hopes of oppressed peoples” and foregrounds human agency. From this perspective, liberation theology found the very notion of development to be deficient in favour of an understanding of development as liberation. These impulses from liberation had an effect also on ecumenical and theological thinking in Africa. During the tenure of Carr Burgess (1971–1978) as general secretary of the AACC, the need for a clear theology in the area of development was noted; most notably at the AACC General Assembly held in Lusaka in 1974 (see AACC 1975, 79). Held during a period of widespread economic slump and growing indebtedness amongst most sub-Saharan African countries, the AACC Lusaka General Assembly impelled an African ecumenical focus on liberation and emphasised the integral relation between development and the search for justice and between unity and justice (see Sakupapa 2018b, 6). Theologically, the AACC articulated the role of the church in development in the language of the prophetic and serving church. This entailed an understanding of the mission of the church as prophetic service in terms of the church “being engaged, involved and sensitive to the well-being of the society” (AACC 1975, 38).

Was there an overall consensus on an ecumenical “theology of development” from the above discussed early ecumenical development discourse? Most probably not. In the context of SODEPAX, a cooperative venture on development between the WCC and the Pontifical Commission of Justice and Peace, a search for a theology of development was initiated (see SODEPAX 1969), but this did not lead to an articulation of such a theology. Instead it resulted in a compilation of a bibliography entitled *Towards a Theology of Development: An Annotated Bibliography* (1970).<sup>5</sup> Part of the challenge in this regard was a plurality and divergences of theological views on the nature of development. According to Loy (2017, 31), the “theology of mission was left behind in the shift towards development but no theology of development was instituted in its place.” This notwithstanding, the above discussion illustrates that the concern of churches with liberation and justice (Gutierrez 1973), for “holistic development of the whole human community” (Robinson 1994, 318), and the integrity of creation have been on the ecumenical agenda. This further indicates that ecumenical theology has been concerned with development discourse. Little wonder that the late South African theologian, Steve De Gruchy (2003, 456), would argue that discourse on theology and development shares the concerns of missiology, social ethics, practical theology, and systematics.

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5 For an overview of the Third World contribution to SODEPAX discussions, see Verstraelen-Gilhuis, G., 1972. “Voices of the third world in Sodepax discussions.” *Exchange* 1 (1): 40–47.

## African Ecumenical Engagement with Development: A Case study of the AACC, 2000–2018

Elsewhere, I have analysed the contribution of the AACC to ecumenical discourse on development for the period 1963–2000 (Sakupapa 2018b). Therein, I explored the theological motivation and self-understanding of the AACC's involvement in development. The main contours of the AACC's engagement with development were tracked through an analysis of primary documents on the AACC. The research findings in that contribution showed that the AACC has been engaged with development concerns since inception, but most explicitly since its Abidjan assembly (1969) where the search of a viable theology of development inaugurated.

Three notions of development were identified in the AACC's engagement with development in the period 1963–2000, namely development as liberation, social transformation, and reconstruction. The notions of social transformation and reconstruction particularly emerged during the 1990s owing to, among other reasons, two key developments. The first was the emerging role of NGOs in development efforts in Africa (see Gibbs and Ajulu 1999). Second, the AACC was faced with the challenge of redefining its self-understanding as an ecumenical organisation amidst the crisis of institutional ecumenism. Little wonder that following its Harare Assembly (AACC 1994), the notion of the church as a power of advocacy was pronounced. The AACC thus actively engaged in advocacy for democracy and human rights and urged member churches to do so. In subsequent periods, the AACC adopted an economic justice perspective in its advocacy against challenges of neoliberal globalisation on the African context.

Theologically, the theology of reconstruction that was proposed by Jesse Mugambi, characterised the AACC's engagement with development with its focus on advocacy. The AACC General Assembly held in Yaoundé, Cameroon in 2003 marked a watershed moment in the AACC's focus on challenges posed by neoliberal globalisation on the African continent. One of the recommendations of the Yaoundé Assembly was the resolve by the AACC to engage with an African Union (AU) initiative on development, namely the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

This resolution was envisaged to contribute towards the implementation of NEPAD in ways that promote "faith, order, dignity, peace, gender equality and justice" on the continent (AACC 2006, 235). Beyond merely acknowledging NEPAD as an appropriate framework for Africa's development, the AACC further adopted an Ecumenical Charter entitled "Behold I Create a New Africa: Ecumenical Engagement with the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)" (see AACC 2007a, 11; Sakupapa 2017, 225–226). The ecumenical charter spelt out specific ways in which churches would engage with NEPAD at local, national and continental levels (see AACC 2006, 228–238). The AACC subsequently established its programme on NEPAD, which was located in Lomé, Togo.

Part of the mandate of the AACC's Lomé office was capacity building for member churches so that they could in turn influence policy formulation, critique and highlight the challenges and emerging trends related to the AU review process, namely the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)<sup>6</sup> (see Deh 2006; Sakupapa 2017, 226).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the AACC was not oblivious to an obvious limitation of the NEPAD initiative, namely the neoliberal framework in which it was formulated (Sakupapa 2017, 227). This concern also found expression in an AACC study document entitled "An Ecumenical Framework for Overcoming Poverty in Africa" (EFOPA), in which proposals were made on how the AACC would induce an alternative globalisation. Similarly, the AACC advocated for the overhaul and review of the EU's neoliberal external trade policy with respect to the European Union's Economic Partnership Agreements (AACC 2007b).

In 2007, the AACC set up a liaison office at the AU in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in an attempt to create greater visibility for the advocacy role of churches at the AU. At its Maputo General Assembly in 2008, the AACC reflected on the churches' advocacy for economic justice and fair trade. Consistent with a focus on advocacy grounded in a prophetic vision of the church, the Maputo Assembly affirmed the Accra Confession and accordingly recommended its adoption amongst AACC member churches (AACC 2012, 155). In the Assembly's final message to member churches (known as the Maputo Covenant), the AACC noted that "with the prevailing forces of globalisation, Africa experiences a new form of oppression with crippling economic burden through unjust international relations, trade and hopeless foreign debts" (AACC 2012, 175). The foregoing discussion shows that the AACC has, since the 1990s, come to stress a focus on advocacy. At its 10th General Assembly held in Kampala Uganda in 2013, the AACC continued on this trajectory of advocacy for economic justice but also extended this to include climate justice (AACC 2015, 95). While the oft used language of the prophetic role of the church in several AACC documents arguably draws from the prophetic visions of the Old Testament and Jesus proclamation of the reign of God, the theological articulation of the AACC's construal of advocacy is not always clear.

### **The Churches' Engagement in Development as Diakonia**

After its most recent general assembly held in Kigali, Rwanda in 2018, the AACC foregrounds prophetic witness as a key aspect in its mission, strategies and principles (see AACC 2018). In 2016, the AACC narrowed its departments to two, namely "Theology, Family Life and Gender Justice"; and "Peace, Diakonia and Development." In the current AACC strategic plan, these have since been reorganised into four programmatic thrusts, namely: "Theology, Interfaith Relations and Ecclesial Leadership

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6 The APRM was a voluntary self-monitoring instrument and, therefore, an essential component of the NEPAD initiative endorsed by the AU in 2002 to promote compliance with the commitments contained in the AU "Declaration on Democracy and Political Governance" (2002).

7 The AACC NEPAD programme published three books in 2006 on the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) in order to encourage and facilitate churches/National Councils of Churches to undertake ecumenical country assessments as part of their participation in the APRM.



Development”; “Gender, Women and Youth”; “Advocacy at the African Union”; and “Peace, Diakonia and Development.” The latter of these programmes continues to ground its focus on advocacy for economic justice in ways that engage with both global and continental development agendas. Thus, through this programmatic structure, the AACC engages with the UN Agenda 2030 and the African Union’s “Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want.” This also includes capacity building for church leaders on issues of economic justice. An interesting development in the AACC’s engagement with development is its collaboration with the WCC on diakonia.<sup>8</sup> Within the ambits of the WCC, diakonia has recently been reconceptualised and foregrounded as an integral dimension of the ecumenical movement (see Senturias and Gill 2014, 244).

In its basic meaning, the noun *diakonia* refers to “service” or “attendance on a duty.”<sup>9</sup> In contemporary ecumenical discourse, various dimensions of diakonia have been highlighted and the term has come to be understood as “having a broader implication for the churches’ engagement with the world” (Phiri and Kim 2014, 255).<sup>10</sup> Diakonia has thus come to be used interchangeably with development. For instance, in the document “Called to Transformative Action, Ecumenical Diakonia,” jointly produced by the WCC, the Lutheran World Federation and ACT Alliance, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals have been framed as a relevant platform for diaconal engagement. Themes such as migration and refugees, economic justice, climate justice, gender justice and health justice are identified as priority areas for diaconal action. This contemporary reinterpretation of ecumenical diakonia foregrounds the outcomes of a WCC conference on “The Theology of Diakonia” held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, from 2–6 June 2012. Further, at its 10th General Assembly held in Busan in 2013, the WCC gave special expression to diakonia by deliberately including an ecumenical conversation on the theme. In the final Assembly Report, the insights from Colombo were affirmed. The Colombo Conference Report highlights three perspectives on diakonia. The first portrays diakonia as “a primary expression of the churches’ participation in the ongoing mission of God” (Ham 2012, 384). The second frames “diakonia from the vantage point of those who are, in many cases, traditionally considered as recipients or objects of churches’ diakonia—the vulnerable and marginalised communities” (Ham 2012, 384). The third perspective calls for an exploration of “what diakonia would be if seen from the vantage point of the global South” not least because dominant models of diakonia have often been shaped and influenced by “the perceptions and preferences of the churches in the geo-political

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8 In May and June 2019, the AACC in collaboration with the WCC conducted three workshops on diakonia in Kenya, Benin and Mozambique respectively. Three similar workshops were conducted in 2017.

9 For a discussion on the etymology of the Greek term *diakonia*, see Collins, J. N. 2014. *Diakonia Studies: Critical Issues in Ministry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3–20. Collins offers a nuanced examination of various assumptions of “service” associated with the New Testament diak-words (διακονια, διακονειν, διακονος).

10 See contributions in volume 66 of *The Ecumenical Review* (Phiri and Kim 2014, 255) which focused on new perspectives on diakonia.

North” (Ham 2012, 384). This reinterpretation of diakonia suggests that understandings of diakonia as merely service or charity (often offered by those in power) are not only narrow but also indicative of an elitist and arrogant view of the special place of the church in God’s mission. Rather, diakonia may be best understood as an integral part of the church’s holistic mission and in this regard expressive of the churches’ participation in the *missio Dei*.

### **Diakonia as Advocacy for Socio-economic Justice and Peace**

Since 2016, the AACC has included advocacy for diakonia in its programmatic thrust that focuses on development. The AACC sees its role in relation to diakonia through the lens of advocacy as well as capacity building of its member churches. This framing of diakonia to include the advocacy for justice and peace illumines diakonia as transformative. In light of wider ecumenical debates on diakonia, the programmatic goal of diakonia, as framed by the AACC, is to “advocate for diakonia as an imperative ministry to the church to be inclusive, empowering and transformative.” As the Colombo participants noted, without “transformative work, diakonia would be a mere expression of service, subtly serving the interests of the oppressive and exploitative powers by covering up their complicity” (Ham 2012, 389). The ecumenical discourse on diakonia calls for the unravelling of sinful social structures by drawing attention to, for example, the causes rather than symptoms of poverty. In this vein, Nordstokke (2014, 266) illustrates how the focus on a critical analysis of what causes poverty highlights advocacy as an integral aspect of diaconal action. As Phiri and Kim (2014, 255) observe, authentic and transformative diakonia “involves both comforting the victim and confronting the ‘powers and principalities’” (Eph. 6:12). For the AACC, this is couched in the language of prophetic ministry of the church as one way of foregrounding the theological basis of the churches’ engagement with development (Sakupapa 2018b, 7). This is understandable for an ecumenical structure such as the AACC that privileges a socio-economic justice approach to sustainable development. This partly explains its emphasis on advocacy and prophetic witness.

Within the South African context, where I live and work, Du Toit (2018) illustrates the significance of prophetic witness against the background of widespread concerns with poverty and inequality, particularly among the previously disadvantaged groups. For Du Toit (2018, 143), such a context requires a “renewed focus on a more justice-based and advocacy-based discourse, which addresses the causes rather than the symptoms of poverty.” Du Toit’s description of diakonia as prophetic action underscores the importance of prophetic witness for social transformation. Here, we may recall a number of ecumenical documents that serve as examples of prophetic witness, such as the Accra Confession and the Kairos Document. The ecumenical church struggle against apartheid in South Africa is another example of the significance for social transformation of the churches’ passionate critique of injustice (De Gruchy 2016). Nevertheless, the positive portrayal of the prophetic role of the church as outlined above begs further reflection—

not least because of the measure of plurality that marks many contemporary African societies.<sup>11</sup>

In the context of the AACC's stress on prophetic witness, the question remains whether resolutions and prophetic statements produced by the AACC reach its membership. Further, the extent to which this discourse reflects the distinctive theological contribution to the development of its member churches is rather unclear. This begs the question about the distinctive theological contribution of ecumenical engagement in development, and whether such engagement is actually representative of the constituency of the AACC. Thus put, I am neither suggesting that specialised diaconal ministries and local engagement in diakonia are mutually exclusive, nor am I oblivious to the nature of ecumenical structures as opposed to their member churches. Rather, my argument is that specialised diaconal ministries can learn and need to take the experiences of faith communities seriously in implementing theological strategies for engaging in development.

### Local Congregations as Subjects of Diakonia

As the Colombo statement noted, "specialised ministries do not replace the mandate of every Christian community to be diaconal" (Ham 2012, 385). Here, the need to appreciate the initiatives and contributions of local congregations or diaconal communities is accentuated. According to Nordstokke (2015, 144), diakonia "is a ministry given to the whole church, and in particular, the local church." It "cannot be a task reserved for groups or institutions, mainly from the North, just because they have money and professional competence at their disposal." It is worth quoting him at length:

What would happen to the understanding of diakonia if, instead of being conceived as benevolent service organized by professional actors—as service for people in need—it were to be reimagined as actions from below, as spaces of transformation, reconciliation, and empowerment where people who themselves have experienced the effects of exclusion, poverty, and suffering are protagonists in actions to promote human dignity, justice, and peace?

This framing of diakonia resonates with the biblical option for the poor, which has found clear expression in the insights of liberation theology on "God's preferential option for the poor." If so, the diakonia of God is not only a "diakonia of liberation" but also one that issues in the restoration of the dignity of people on the margins and in ensuring justice and peace. This necessarily calls attention to perspectives on diakonia as lived and experienced by the marginalised. The struggles of marginalised people for justice,

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11 See Bedford-Strohm, H. 2013. "Poverty, Wealth and Ecology: A Theological Perspective." *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal* 54 (Supplement 5): 24–36. For a nuanced discussion of the limitations of prophetic discourse, see Naudé, P. J. 2011. "Is Prophetic Discourse adequate to Address Global Economic Justice?" *HTS Theological Studies* 67 (1): 1–8. See also the idea of mission as "prophetic dialogue" advanced by Bevans, S. B., and R. P. Schroeder. 2011. *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*. New York: Orbis Books.

dignity, rights and ultimately for life, unveil the presence of God in their lives (see Ham 2012, 387). This suggests affording hermeneutical and theological significance to the struggles and praxis of the poor. The South African black theologian, Takatso Mofokeng, illustrated this in his perceptive interpretation of the resurrection of Christ as God's insurrection. Christ's resurrection, Mofokeng (1983, 259) argued, "awakens the oppressed people's insurrection against injustice." Drawing on this, I argue that diakonia needs to illumine the agency of the poor.

The AACC's appropriation of diakonia in its programmatic thrust on development is significant, albeit in need for translation; not least because dominant models of diakonia are shaped by the theological preference of churches and theologians in the global North. The failed project of the United Church of Zambia's institutionalised model of diaconal workers (based on a North American model) illustrates the potential dangers of uncritically appropriating models developed in other contexts. In the context of the AACC's appropriation of diakonia and its partnership with the WCC in this regard, it is crucial to ponder on contextual questions. What would diakonia mean in an African context, characterised by the pentecostalisation of so-called mainline churches?<sup>12</sup> How best could diakonia be translated so that the notion may find better expression, for example through various African notions of communality and solidarity? (see Sakupapa 2018a, 11). In the process of such translation, ecumenical structures, such as the AACC, need to deliberately engage with Pentecostal and African Independent Churches (AICs). This is critical, not least because of the wide recognition of the pentecostalisation of mainline Christianity in Africa, but also given the impact of African pentecostalism on institutional ecumenism in many parts of Africa. Therefore, in the context of the changing ecumenical landscapes in Africa, the Pentecostal movement may well enrich the ecumenical movement. As some studies of African Pentecostalism demonstrate, Pentecostalism functions as a transformative agent for its adherents. Marshall (2009, 9) has, for instance, described Pentecostal agency in terms of what she calls the born-again "techniques of self-fashioning." According to Wariboko (2014, 90), these practices are a "particular mechanism that the born-again enacts so that her vision of the good life becomes part of the fabric of her disposition." Further, recent scholarship on religion and development underscores the potential of AICs as actors of development (Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb 2016). As Bompani (2010, 321–322) observes: "AICs develop the potentiality of self-development, freedom, and self-empowerment, as well as techniques of economic resistance and development, and political participation."

## Conclusion

This article reviewed the engagement of the AACC in development by analysing the ways in which the AACC has drawn on theological resources in its work for

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12 See Sakupapa, Teddy C. 2016. "(95) Christianity in Zambia." In *Anthology of African Christianity* edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner, 758–765. Oxford: Regnum Books International; and Cephas Narh Omenyo. 2006. *Pentecost outside Pentecostalism: A Study of the Development of Charismatic Renewal in the Mainline Churches in Ghana*. Uitgeverij Boekencentrum.

reconciliation, peace building, and social transformation. That the AACC privileges a socio-economic justice approach to development, partly explains the central place of advocacy and prophetic witness in its programmatic arrangements. It was argued that the AACC has expanded its focus on development by appropriating the recent comprehensive approach to the churches' prophetic witness and advocacy under the rubric of diakonia. While the churches' engagement in transformational development in the African context can indeed find expression in the notion of diakonia, this article argued for the translation of diakonia. Such an argument is at the same time a call for the decolonial reframing of African churches' engagement in development, and ultimately of the redefinition of development from other than Western perspectives. Nevertheless, diakonia remains a significant theological and ecclesiological notion.

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