

Grassrootlevel Church

God's Children in Action

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Knoetze, Johannes, and Jacques W. Beukes, eds. *Diaconia: Acts, Understandings, and Stories of Service in a Pluralistic Southern Africa*. Wellington, South Africa: Barnabus Academic Publishers, 2025. Pp. 334. South African Rand 350 (paperback)¹

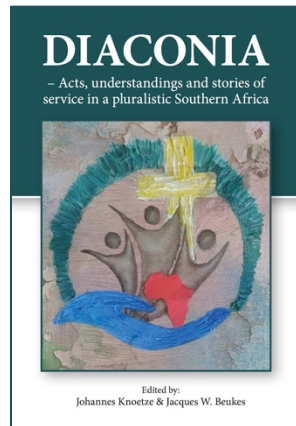
Willem-Henri DEN HARTOG²

GZB, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe
WdHartog@gzb.nl

This volume explores the theology and practice of diaconal ministry within the context of Southern Africa. Edited by Johannes Knoetze and Jacques W. Beukes, both academics based in Pretoria, the book is divided into four sections:

- (A) *The Context through Africa's Stories*;
- (B) *Diaconia: A Challenge*;
- (C) *Diaconia: An Indicative*; and
- (D) *Diaconia: A Practice*.

One of the strengths of the book is that it begins with a concrete example of the Church in action. **Isabel Apawo Phiri's** chapter, "Missiological and Diaconal Imperatives in the Context of Cyclone Freddy in Phalombe, Malawi," describes how churches responded after Cyclone Freddy devastated southeastern Malawi in 2023. Rather than approaching *diaconia* merely as a theological concept, the chapter demonstrates how Christian service is embodied in practical ministry during times of crisis. This immediately sets the tone for the volume by showing that



¹ The Fellowship of Deacons of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA) has made an open access copy of this book available at

<https://acsafod.org.za/papers/2025%20Diaconia-Acts-understanding-and-stories.pdf>

² Rev. den Hartog is a former Associate Pastor of Limbe Church of Central African Presbyterian (CCAP) in Limbe, Malawi.

diaconia is not simply a theoretical construct but an expression of the church's lived witness.

For me, the highlight of the book is **Nioma Venter's** chapter, "Collaborative-Integrated Missional Diaconal Praxis: Introducing the Scaling Diaconate Model." This is one of the most practical and innovative contributions to the volume. **Venter** explains how the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) has played a significant role in South Africa's social welfare sector through both local congregations and church-related social service organisations. By 2024, twelve registered social service organisations were directly affiliated with the DRC.

She argues that the transition to democratic South Africa after 1994 forced the DRC to rethink both its identity and its social responsibility. Faced with widespread poverty, inequality, and unemployment, the church recognised that a more systematic and collaborative approach to social ministry was required. At the same time, cooperation between church structures and professional welfare organisations often remained fragmented and ineffective. These challenges eventually prompted the DRC to rethink its mission within a rapidly changing society. A significant milestone was reached in 2013, when the General Synod formally adopted a missional ecclesiology, encouraging new ways of understanding and practising diaconal ministry.

One practical outcome of this renewed vision was *Little Seeds*, a partnership between congregations in the Western Cape and Badisa, a major non-governmental organisation providing professional social welfare services. The project focused on early childhood development as a means of addressing deep-rooted social challenges. Little Seeds became a successful example of collaborative and integrated diaconal ministry and ultimately served as the prototype for what later became known as the *Scaling Diaconate Model*.

The model seeks to help congregations move beyond isolated acts of charity towards sustainable, community-based social engagement. The experience of Little Seeds demonstrated that effective partnerships require a shared vision, shared resources, shared knowledge, and strong communication. At the same time, it became evident that churches and welfare organizations often operate according to very different organizational cultures. Churches are typically volunteer-driven, relational, flexible, and motivated by a sense of calling, whereas NGOs tend to be more formal, professionally managed, highly regulated, and accountable to legal and policy frameworks.

Rather than viewing these differences as obstacles, **Venter** argues that they should be understood as complementary strengths that require careful management. Churches contribute local trust, committed volunteers, buildings, and deep community relationships, while organisations such as Badisa provide

professional expertise, sound governance, legal compliance, and extensive experience in social work and early childhood development.

Theologically, this approach is grounded in missional theology, the *missio Dei*, and the relational nature of the Triune God. **Venter** supports her argument with numerous diagrams and tables, which clearly explain the Scaling Diaconate Model. The model identifies four interconnected spheres of diaconal engagement — advocacy and support, intervention, protection, and flourishing — and encourages movement between these different forms of ministry according to local needs. In **Venter's** view, the Scaling Diaconate Model offers the DRC a flexible and relational framework for building partnerships that strengthen collective impact and contribute to the flourishing of communities.

The chapter by **Nioma Venter** provides valuable theoretical insights that can be applied relatively easily to the wider context of Southern Africa. This is less the case with the chapter by **Johan M. van der Merwe** on *diaconia* in the Dutch Reformed Church, entitled “The Ghost of Apartheid Arising?” **Van der Merwe** argues that Afrikaner nationalism is experiencing a resurgence, partly reflected in the restoration of statues commemorating Boer soldiers. For the author, this recalls the apartheid era, when Afrikaner nationalism was also highly influential. During that period, *diaconia* functioned, at least in part, as an instrument of apartheid ideology: assistance was primarily directed towards their own group (Afrikaners), while mission work was focused on non-white communities.

Van der Merwe warns that neo-Afrikaner nationalism carries the risk of returning to this pattern: that the church may once again focus its diaconal efforts primarily on Afrikaners, especially in the context of failing government services in South Africa. He rightly urges the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) not to follow this path again. Members of the DRC should be reminded that their diaconal calling extends to all cultural groups and communities. This is an important and timely appeal.

However, **Van der Merwe** develops his argument through references to Afrikaner cultural history (for example, Sarel Cilliers) and makes frequent use of Afrikaans terminology. For readers who are not familiar with Afrikaner culture or who cannot read Afrikaans, this chapter may therefore be difficult to engage with fully.

An article of exceptionally high academic quality is **Erica Meijers's** contribution, entitled “A Praxis of Grace, Desire and Resistance: Methodology for a Eucharistic Diaconia.” She describes the practice of communal worship in the Nassau Church in Amsterdam, where the sharing of bread and wine is open not only to the congregation but also to the surrounding neighbourhood, in this case the Staatsliedenbuurt. The central question she explores is how the wider

Willem-Henri den Hartog

Grassrootlevel Church: God's Children in Action

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *The African Church and COVID-19: Human Security, the Church, and Society in Kenya*, edited by Martin Munyao et al.

neighbourhood can become involved in the rituals of the church community. Within this framework, Holy Communion becomes more than a ritual concerned solely with individual salvation.

Meijers then provides a highly informed explanation of the meaning and function of Holy Communion within the Calvinist tradition. As a Dutchman, I can fully appreciate the context she describes, especially because I have also worked in Amsterdam myself. However, the social reality of the Staatsliedenbuurt neighbourhood and the Western European understanding of church life are far removed from the ecclesial realities in Southern Africa of churches such as the Reformed Church of Zimbabwe or the Zionist Christian Church. This raises an important question: who benefits from the inclusion of this chapter in a volume focusing on diaconal practices within the pluralistic context of Southern Africa?

Very little has been published on the subject of diaconal ministry in (Southern) Africa. Although the majority of contributions in this book focus on South Africa, Malawi, or the Netherlands, it would have been valuable if the editors had applied a more critical selection process regarding which contributions should be included. This observation, however, does not diminish the significant achievement of **Knoetze** and **Beukes** in bringing these authors together and publishing this volume.

The book provides churches and Christians with inspiration to engage in diaconal ministry and practical guidance on how to implement such ministry. The "Afterword" at the end of the book is particularly helpful in this regard. CLF³ has done an excellent job in publishing this beautifully produced volume, and I hope it will find its way into the hands of many Christians in Africa and beyond.

³ Barnabus Academic Publishers is an imprint of CLF Publishers.