

Religion and Development – Vulnerable Youth, New Life Stories and Faith-Based Organizations

Marianne Skjortnes*

The School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger, Norway

marianne.skjortnes@vid.no

Abstract

Christian churches across the world have long engaged in humanitarian assistance and diaconal work. Diaconal action, understood as integral to the church's mission in today's world, is conditioned and challenged by concrete contexts. In order to be relevant, *diakonia* requires a careful reading of the contexts. This article presents life histories of three individuals who live in Madagascar. The stories relate how living in a world of poverty and need, humiliation and lack of safety provides many challenges relating to the fulfillment of needs and creating decent living conditions. The stories also tell of lives where many have met Christian individuals and institutions that give priority to the task of upholding human dignity. My aim has been to shed

* Marianne Skjortnes (b. 1953) is Associate Professor in Social Anthropology at the School of Mission and Theology in Stavanger, Norway. She has a long and extensive experience from work with development issues in several African countries, particularly in Madagascar, where she has lived and worked with research and consultancy on development issues for several years, as well as employee of Norwegian Mission Society working with the Malagasy Lutheran Church as a teacher. Her focus has been on culture, social change, and gender and development. She is currently involved in research on religion and development.

light on the meaning of diaconal work has for these young people and how new opportunities and challenges are creating new life stories and changes in their experience of human dignity. The objective has also been to describe the added value that religion and Christian organizations provide to the secular development project.

Keywords

human dignity, faith-based organizations, *diakonia*, Madagascar, life stories

The aim of this study is to present stories of experienced lives and human dignity from the city of Antsirabe in Madagascar. I describe how vulnerable youth in the city, through participating in the diaconal work of the church,¹ challenge poverty and dehumanization resulting from deprivation of their fundamental freedoms and basic rights. My aim has been to shed light on the meaning of diaconal work has for these young people and how new opportunities and challenges are creating new life stories and changes in their experience of human dignity. The objective has

¹ The concept of *diakonia* is used in the sense of development work related to improving people's living conditions. According to Lutheran World Federation (LWF), *diakonia* is central to what it means to be a church and reaches out to all persons, who are created in God's image. While *diakonia* begins as unconditional service to the neighbor in need, it leads inevitably to social change that restores, reforms and transforms (Lutheran World Federation 2003:6).

also been to describe the added value that faith-based organizations (FBO) ² provide to the secular development project. ³

In this article I will present the life histories of three people who live in Madagascar, in a society with many needs, both social and economic. The stories relate how living in a world of poverty and need, humiliation and lack of safety provides many challenges relating to the fulfilment of needs and creating decent living conditions. I am primarily concerned with the role of Christianity in a changing society and the article focuses on church members' experiences of the diaconal work of the church in the context of their everyday lives.

Religion has until recently largely been ignored in development studies, politics and practice. In the modern world there has for many years been a tendency to devalue the role of religion in the public sphere and religion's significance for individuals. One of the reasons for this has been an assumption in the secular world that religion disappears as societies are modernized. Over the past years several actors have challenged secularization theories and debated the role of religion in social development. The World Bank has in several contexts taken up the question of religion's positive potential for development (Clarke 2006; 2007; Marshall and Van Saanen

² I use the term 'faith-based organization' (FBO) in reference to 'any organization that derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles of the faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within that faith' (Clarke 2008:6).

³ This will be more thoroughly elaborated in my forthcoming book, *Restoring Dignity in Rural and Urban Madagascar: On How Religion Creates New Life-stories*.

2007). Religion is now seen as potentially crucial to the achievement of developmental aims. One might speak of a paradigm shift when it comes to the relationship between religion and development, and the recent interest has been expressed in several ways over the past years.

Faith-Based Organizations and Human Dignity

FBOs have across the world been deeply involved in humanitarian assistance and diaconal work, especially in the arenas of education and health. In current diaconal work there is an increasing awareness among faith-based communities, especially within the Christian tradition, of how important it is to define and shape their development work or *diakonia* to act in favor of suffering and marginalized people, and to draw on impulses and knowledge from secular development work (Clarke 2008:2). At the same time, FBOs have their own identity and particularity.

The concept of *diakonia* is elaborated in a recent document from the Lutheran World Federation, *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment*. Here *diakonia* is defined as the call and duty of the entire church, an expression of the church's being and life (Lutheran World Federation 2009). It is perceived to be the church's externally directed activity, and is explained as the church's means to show God's love to people in need. Diaconal action, understood as integral to the church's mission in today's world, is conditioned and challenged by concrete contexts. In order to be relevant, *diakonia* requires a careful reading of the contexts.

Human dignity is founded in the global commitment of governments to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and to the rights-based approach launched by the United

Nations and expressed in the Millennium Development Goals (2001). From a Christian FBO perspective the concept of human dignity is also founded on the belief that all human beings are created in the image of God as equals with the same basic rights and obligations. Human dignity is seen as God-given and therefore inherent in every human being – regardless of their situation in life, gender or ethnicity. Human dignity is at the core of religious values. A holistic understanding of human dignity brings a perspective of faith to secular approaches to human rights and faith emphasizes the rights and entitlements of the individual (Norwegian Church Aid 2005-2009, Norwegian Mission Society 1996:6). Consequently, violations of people's needs are understood as humiliation and dehumanization resulting from deprivation of their fundamental freedoms and basic entitlements (Goldewijk and Gaay Fortman 1999; Uvin 2004). From the point of view of the church it is therefore decisive that such needs are met: that the dignity of each and every human being is respected and that the dignity of the most vulnerable is actively protected.

Context

The population of Madagascar is 20.1 million. Madagascar is currently placed among the poorest countries in the world by the UN Human Development Index, being number 151 out of 187 countries (Human Development Report 2011). The majority of the population does not have access to health care, resulting in malnutrition and poor health. Tropical diseases like malaria are a major cause of death, especially among children. The most economically developed areas are in the highlands, partly due to the efforts of the Malagasy Lutheran Church (Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy-FLM).

Throughout its history, since 1867, FLM has been active in promoting development through health care, education and rural development. The present leadership is concerned to maintain emphasizing the importance of diaconal work. As it is expressed in the Vision of FLM: “The Malagasy Lutheran Church remains faithful to its calling to proclaim Christ to Madagascar and to accompany this proclamation by acts of solidarity according to its economic and human resources”, and “Man consists of spirit, soul and body. This holistic approach is the foundation for all activities in the FLM. To contribute to better living conditions for people is therefore also an important matter for the church” (Policy for the Development Sector of FLM 2004). In today’s Madagascar FLM, with its approximately three million members, is a powerful actor in the civil society. Many schools are run by FLM, including schools for the blind and deaf. By this the church demonstrates how attention is given to the less privileged in the society. The church is also an important actor in serving the population with health services, and promoting economic, social and cultural development through rural development as agriculture and animal husbandry, and income generating activities.

The local situation for FLM and its diaconal work in Madagascar is impacted by broader economic, religious, social, cultural and political trends. This points to the ambiguous nature of globalization. The global picture helps to understand what is happening in the local context, but it also goes the other way round. The general impoverishment taking place in the country, especially since the beginning of 2009, when a new regime led by President Andry Rajoelina

was installed as a result of a military coup d'état, has consequences for the church⁴. Weak governance, corruption, and increasing unemployment related to international sanctions on Madagascar, are some of the factors that add suffering upon suffering for people living in poverty. On the other hand, globalization has brought benefits for different aspects of human life and to the diaconal work of the church. It has increased awareness of social issues and human suffering and the church's ability to react and respond to poverty and crises. Much of this has been possible due to global efforts such as the Millennium Development Goals launched by the United Nations in 2001 and cooperation and partnership with faith based organizations from the west (Marshall and Keough 2004: 4).

The needs of the Malagasy population are numerous, and the State can only partly meet them, accordingly FLM finds it necessary to give its contribution to the fight against the many facets of poverty. In this context it means that FLM in its activities especially seeks to defend and support the worth and the dignity of man, particularly of the weak, the poor and the most marginalized, to promote women and youth, to strengthen local communities, and to protect of the environment

⁴ The military coup was condemned by the international community. On September 17, 2011, representatives of most of Madagascar's major political factions signed a "Roadmap for Ending the Crisis in Madagascar", which was endorsed by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and aimed at ending the long political crisis through the formation of a more neutral, power-sharing interim government that would prepare the country for elections (U.S Department of State 2012).

by promoting behavior that enables people to live and fulfill their potential (Policy for the Development Sector of FLM 2004).

An important goal of the *diakonia* in FLM is to further the value and the dignity of human beings according to the Christian faith. For that reason the church emphasizes the great value of basic human rights and their unlimited worth. As a consequence, in Antsirabe city, a Diaconal Center related to unemployed youth, especially single mothers, was established in 2003 (Project Document 2008-2012). The objective of the project is to increase the standard of living of marginalized youth between the ages of 18 and 35 years and with a minimum education of five years' basic education. This marginalization is defined by inadequate competence and the lack of resources to survive and increase their competence. Without any appropriate help, this situation causes social exclusion (Project Document 2008-2012:1).

The diaconal work is financially supported by Norwegian Mission Society (NMS),⁵ a Norwegian Lutheran non-governmental organization, that carries out both religious preaching as well as diaconal and development work. During the difficult political year of 2009, with an increasing amount of unemployment in the Malagasy society, 121 marginalized young people, mostly women, were recruited and the nursery school received 37 children less than six years old (Malagasy Lutheran Church 2011).

⁵ NMS was active in founding The Malagasy Lutheran Church in 1867, and has worked ever since in a close partnership-relation to the church.

The main goals of the Diaconal Center, with its project staff of six permanent employees, are to build relevant competence and provide support for those applying for jobs and to help to create income-generating activities for those who have an aptitude for it. In order to reach these objectives the Diaconal Center gives information to all partners involved in the project (churches, members of the church committees, the representatives of the state, etc.) on training programs and on the goals and activities in the project. The Diaconal Center gives spiritual, psychological and technical education to the marginalized youth and single mothers during the time they spend there. By the use of singing, Bible study and prayer as a frame for the teaching, the participants on the course are made conscious of the significance of self-knowledge and determination. It is also the responsibility of the staff to guide all beneficiaries in following the vocational and technical training, to give grants, and to provide the mothers with supplies. The training aims at equipping the participants either to establish income-generating activities or to find a job. The Diaconal Center offers daycare for children of less than six years of the single mothers who attend the Center's activities. The mothers also receive lessons in nutrition and childcare (Project Document 2008-2012).

Lifestories – Methodology

The life-stories which I present here are based on qualitative interviews with three people as examples of people who, as a result of unemployment and lack of resources, have been in difficult situations.⁶ The stories reflect of the lives of people for whom a meeting with the

⁶ The study took place in the beginning of year 2010. The empirical research was undertaken through qualitative interviews of selected informants related to the diaconal work of the church.

diaconal work of the Lutheran church has created new possibilities, and new hope, in an otherwise difficult situation in life. They stand out as examples and tell us something of the breadth and diversity in this special context.

The subjects of the study represent young people in the church's diaconal activity, young people who have set up their own companies or young people who have become salaried workers. I met people who want to talk about themselves and of how their lives have been changed through encountering the church's Diaconal Center. This is not to say that the Center has a positive effect in the lives of all those who enter it or that all those youth who do receive help will continue to experience a degree of stability or a sense of progress in their lives.

My approach to these stories is that they are a way to study reality. From such a perspective one can say that a life history is a subjective account of a reflective character. It is the story of an individual person's search for belonging within certain social and cultural conditions (Gullestad 1996). At the same time these life histories claim to describe real events, experiences and reflections. The stories are descriptions of the historical and social reality (Furseth 2006). This reality consists of objective events and facts, but also of one individual's subjective experience of life. As such, a life history is a contribution to the development and presentation of an extended historical understanding of reality.

In addition to the current study I have carried out extensive fieldwork in different regions of Madagascar since 1979. Research topics have been development and social and cultural processes of change in the Malagasy society.

Life history as a story tells us something of how people experience and interpret their lives. The story can treat all aspects of life or it can provide a window on parts of life, but whether or not the stories are complete or only deal with certain themes, they will be a synthesis. It is this attempt to describe her or his life as a subjective synthesis that makes life histories so unique (Furseth 2006:27). What is characteristic of a life history as collection of data is the co-operation between researcher and informant. The advantage with such a relationship is that the life history provides space for a nuanced understanding of individual perspectives, experiences and situations in life.

Justine, Female, 35 Years Old

My family has always been involved in buying and selling. My father died when I was young, and my mother has ever since then sold small cakes and bread which she produced herself. She walked around in the city and sold to passers-by, and it was this that was the family's livelihood. I have followed in the same footsteps...

Justine is a single mother with a son four years old and a daughter ten years old. Her husband left her when she was pregnant with the second child. She has not seen him since. He just left.

Justine grew up to the south of the big Saturday market in Antsirabe. She was the second in a family of nine siblings, and since her father died when she was small, she always had to take responsibility and help at home so that the family could get through the day and have enough to live on. She never had the opportunity to graduate from elementary school but went to school for

eight years before she had to drop out. She was needed at home and in addition there was not enough money to continue to send her to school. But she was happy that she had so many years at school. Many of those whom she had grown up with had to be satisfied with only five years of schooling and many parents considered it enough that children passed their CEPE exam (Certificat Primaire) after fifth grade.

Justine's mother sustained the family by baking bread and cakes, which were sold around the city to shops, market sellers and occasional customers in the street. Justine grew up with this life and this experience, and learnt much about baking from her mother. After a time there were too many mouths to feed at home for Justine's mother and Justine felt she must find her own work and income to feed herself and at the same time provide economic support for her mother and siblings. Justine got married, moved in with her husband and had two children.

When her husband left her, it was difficult to find enough food for the daily requirements of herself and the children. It was demanding to have responsibility for the children and housework and to continue to sell cakes in the city. The income from the sale of cakes was not constant and did not provide for the daily needs of herself and the children. Often all three went hungry, she did not have the money to buy school uniform or other clothes for them and could not afford for either herself or the children to go to the doctor when they were ill. She felt her situation was becoming more and more desperate and could see no solution for the demanding responsibility she had for herself and the children. When her daughter – at that time in fourth grade – became ill, she did not know what to do. It began with a sort of “flu” and a cold, but after a time she was bleeding so much, often a nose-bleed, that she had to be taken out of school. Justine had no

money for treatment by the doctor, or medicines, so as a result the daughter had to quit school and be kept at home.

Justine's neighbors saw that she was having problems, and one day one of the women in the neighborhood came and told her that she had heard that the Lutheran church in town had an offer for unemployed young people who were in difficulty. Justine had been brought up in, and belonged to, the Catholic church, and her children had been baptised there, so she was not sure whether this was an offer that could apply to her. But after a while she was so desperate that she decided to find the Diaconal Center that her neighbor had mentioned. After conversations, interviews and written applications, it was considered that Justine's situation should qualify her for support from the Center and she signed a contract with them for training, economic support and courses which she was obligated to complete.

In the course of the conversations, Justine expressed her desire to set up her own business. After a time she decided to sell small meals and main meals to farmers who came in from the countryside to the main market in the city to sell their harvests. She would build a small street café where she could sell food: salads, soup, rice and meat, and beans. With help from the Diaconal Center a plan was drawn up for how this could be realized and the goals met. For the first two or three months she would take a training course in administration, planning use of time, organizing the workload, sales and accounting. In addition, she was also provided with a general education at the Center, including psychology, personal hygiene, bringing up children and general Bible knowledge. That was followed by a 2-3 months course in food preparation and cake-baking at one of the city's vocational schools. Then she was ready to start setting up her

street café.

Justine had picked out a strategic place to build her shed, along the road right by the market. The Diaconal Center contributed the materials for the building, along with a coal-fired barbecue-grill, pans, plates, cutlery and some raw rice and vegetables to get her started. So Justine began her roadside café, and began selling meals. In the meantime she had moved back to her mother's house, and there were five people living there: the mother, a younger brother, Justine's two children and herself. The three adults had decided that they would share the daily household chores, take responsibility for the children and run the café. In addition, the mother and the brother had a small piece of land where they grew maize, sweet potatoes and manioc. The family had inherited the land and the crops contributed to the income from the sale of food at the café.

Justine gets up at three o'clock every morning to heat up the stove and to begin preparing breakfast for the first farmers who come to the market. The food is ready from 4.00 am. "Sales are going well", she says. She offers both breakfast and a main meal in the middle of the day, and it is usually five in the evening before she shuts up shop for the day. Then she has to get ready to buy in food for the next day's food production and sale: half a sack of charcoal, 15 kilograms of rice, vegetables, salad, beans and two kilograms of beef. It is not before 8 or 9 o'clock in the evening that Justine can go home to her home and family. The profit from the day's sales is about 4,000 Ariary⁷ per day after deduction of all expenses. She goes to bed at 10 o'clock, exhausted, but happy that she can now provide for her children and family.

⁷ 4,000 Ariary is approximately US\$ 2.00.

“Life is much better now”, Justine says. Now she is earning money every day and a set income for each day.

This money means that we have enough to live on and we can manage. I no longer have to worry or think about anything other than my sales. Now the family always has enough food, either because we eat up the leftovers from the day’s cooking or because we can buy what we need.

With the income she has also been able to buy some hens as her reserve capital. She bought them a few at a time and now has seven. She has also been able to buy cooking pans and plates for her household. Justine speaks with great appreciation for the help and support she received from the Center:

Without them it would never have been possible. Now I’ve become a Protestant. I go to church every Sunday, and I thank God. Without God helping me and giving me a new direction in life, this change in my living condition would not have been possible.

I ask Justine for her perception of the good life.

To be able to stand on one’s own feet, and not to be a burden for anyone else, or that parents and husband weigh me down with their demands. Now I am dependent on my mother, but I would like to be independent. I would like to gain more knowledge and develop myself.

Just think – one day I could build a house where I could live with my children!

Only God knows what the future will bring, but my wish is that we as a family will be protected by God, and that he will bless us as he has done since I got my new business.

My wish is also that we as a family would have a better life with our own house. I wish too that my children could have an education and that my eldest daughter could have the opportunity to get what she missed at school.

Mihantra, Male, 26 Years Old

I wanted a different life for myself and my children than what I had when I was growing up. My children should learn to behave properly, because if they don't, this will have consequences for their future.

Mihantra grew up in Tritriva, a village about 20 kilometers outside Antsirabe. His mother and stepfather were farmers and cultivated the land and kept hens. His mother also sewed clothes and wove straw hats which she sold at the market. Later the household was able to acquire two cows for milk. Mihantra's mother came originally from Farihimena, a village 60 kilometers north of Tritriva, and when she was pregnant with her third child, she asked for a divorce from her husband and chose to move back to her home village. A year or two later she became pregnant by the man who would be Mihantra's father and they agreed to get married. However her first husband persuaded her to come back to Tritriva with the four children and the planned marriage was cancelled. Later she had three more children by her first husband in Tritriva.

For Mihantra it was difficult to grow up with a stepfather who wanted nothing to do with him; all communication between them went via the mother. His stepfather was never satisfied with him and complained all the time about Mihantra to his mother. Mihantra was the fourth of seven children and felt that he was ordered around and not taken much care of. "You have no future

here”, an older neighbor said to him. “You ought to go to Antsirabe and find work there”, he said by way of friendly advice.

While he lived in Tritriva Mihantra had never taken his primary school exam (CEPE) after fifth grade. It was not possible for the family to keep all the children in school. Mihantra remembers his home as a household in which it was always an effort to provide food for the family and to earn enough to pay for schooling. When he moved to Antsirabe, he was able to continue his schooling to ninth grade, even though he did not have the CEPE-exam. At that time he made his living by selling cloth at the Saturday market while he was also going to school. He bought textiles at a cheaper price than he sold them for and managed in this way to make a little profit that he could live on. He had learnt a little about cloth and sewing from his mother and he could use this to his advantage as a seller. Mihantra thinks that this was a very difficult time. He lived from hand to mouth with only himself to rely on.

Mihantra understood clearly that if he was ever going to get out of poverty and not keep experiencing a shortage of everything he needed, drastic changes had to take place. Mihantra was active in the Lutheran church in Antsirabe; he was in the choir and went to meetings arranged by the revival movement. Here he heard about the Diaconal Center which supported the young unemployed with problems so that they could find work, and Mihantra applied to take some of the courses on offer. He took a six-month course in sewing and clothes design and a course in English at the same time. Tailoring was something he had grown up with and seen his mother do. By the end of his schooling, this competence provided him with work at one of the free trade

zone factories in the city of Antsirabe, which produced clothes for export.⁸ Mihantra reckons this is a good job, even though the nine-hour working day is long. He considers that the work gives him a good salary taking into account the bonuses that the staff can get when they reach the goals set by the leadership. The basic wage is 90,000 Ariary a month, and if the goals are reached, then there is an additional 100,000-120,000 Ariary. Mihantra thinks these are working conditions he can readily accept. After a time he was also given greater responsibilities in the workplace and his employer has said that he is one of the workers they want to invest in. Mihantra feels safe in his employment in the company, despite the fact that political unrest in the country has caused lay-offs of staff or reduced working hours or salary.⁹“Now I have defined my goal in life, fifty percent of the job is done”, he says.

Mihantra is very grateful to the Diaconal Center that helped him to find a new life and a secure job. They helped him establish himself, to find accommodation in the city, to buy a mattress and

⁸ A free trade zone (FTZ) is an area of a country where it is agreed to reduce or eliminate trade barriers in hopes of attracting new business and foreign investments. A free trade zone can be defined as labor intensive manufacturing center that involves the import of raw materials and the export of factory products (USA International Business Publications 2001). This is an attempt by the Malagasy Government to promote employment within cities. The rationale is that the zones will attract employers and thus reduce poverty and unemployment and stimulate the area's economy.

⁹ Since the military coup in 2009 the country has been in an unstable political period. This has led to sanctions from the international community and foreign trade has stopped. This has hit, not least, the country's textile industry.

the necessary kitchen equipment, and to find purpose and direction in his life. He has learnt that he is responsible for his own choices and for setting his goals. He also learnt to think from the course he took: “What I am doing, I do for myself and not for others”. Defining his life goals became an important step for Mihantra. What did he want, and what possible options did he have? Mihantra decided early on that he would do all he could to succeed. He understood that he had to work on all aspects of his life if it was going to be good. It was not enough just to get a job; he also needed to live a responsible and purposeful life. He had been taught to go to church and that to practice the Christian faith was a good thing but had not previously thought much about how to handle life’s challenges. Mihantra’s aim was to have a good life in which his material needs were satisfied. He now understood that his Christian faith was important in order to reach the goals he had set in his life and that believing in God in his everyday life would enable him to achieve a good life. On the course he had learnt that fulfilling one’s aim would depend on whether there was a connection between what one does and what one is and believes in, and that it is necessary to understand oneself in relation to the situation one is in. “What was my fault in what happened? That’s a question I must ask myself”, says Mihantra. “I asked God for a good wife who would have the same attitude to life,” he maintains. Mihantra found the wife he wanted at his workplace. She sewed clothes at the same textile factory as he did. A week after they met, they decided to get married. They were convinced that they were right for each other, and decided to travel home to their families to ask for permission to get married. Both families gave their blessing and the wedding day was decided. The wedding was held in Betafo, 20 kilometers west of Antsirabe, at the courthouse that was nearest to the bride’s family. All the formalities and rituals would be carried out on the same day. Mihantra was presented to his in-laws, the dowry was paid, and the wedding ceremony was conducted in the courthouse. At first

the couple rented accommodation in a village just north of Antsirabe and bought some ducks to breed. Not long after the wedding they purchased a plot of land about 300-400m² and began to grow vegetables. Here they would later build a house and set up a compound. One of Mihantra's younger sisters lives with them in the house they rent and takes responsibility for the ducks and for preparing meals.

“Today my life is full of hope”, Mihantra says. Life is now good for Mihantra and his improved living standards are beginning to benefit both his immediate and his extended families.

According to cultural norms, both he and his wife have obligations to the extended family. It is expected that they will provide financial assistance and social care to the extent that they are able. Mihantra supports his family in Tritriva when they require economic assistance and helps to keep his siblings in school. He visits regularly, and particularly helps with resolving conflicts when disagreements arise in the family. In the same way his wife must contribute in relationship to her family. She is the youngest sibling and, like the rest of them, provides economic support. She gives her father 10,000 Ariary per month as well as food. For the last few years her father has been a widower and she visits him twice a month. Mihantra thinks that they have organized their duties to the extended family in a way that is good and fair. He and his wife continue to work at the factory and the working days are long. “That means that both of us have to do our share of the housework at home”, says Mihantra, explaining that he has to do more in the house than he was brought up to do as a boy at home. There he was taught that it was the man's job to provide the income for the household, while the task of the women was to do the daily housework and make the meals. It was also the husband's job to see to it that the members of the family behaved properly. Mihantra believes that this is important, because it will have

consequences for their future. “In today’s society, it is appropriate to have two children”, he considers.

If the factory for any reason should cease production, Mihantra will at least have his land to fall back on, its crops, and his poultry. He has plans to save up money to buy more land and increase his property, and he would like in time to be able to provide more financial support for the extended family. They also need more equipment and furniture in their house. There are many goals and he has clear plans for how they can be fulfilled. If he should stop working at the free trade zone factory, he would try to find another paid job in addition to what he earns from the smallholding. Mihantra reckons that would be the most profitable. Mihantra finishes by saying that his dream for the future is that there should be enough for the daily needs of his family, that they should have a good life and that he will have children who thank and honor God. He wishes that his family will live with dignity and with God’s protection.

Harimalala, Female, 34 Years Old

Now, I am not poor any more. That is the most important thing. I can manage well today. I am independent and not dependent on anyone. Before I didn’t sleep well – I thought of all the problems, the worries. Now I sleep well at night. Now life is good.

Harimalala is a single mother with responsibility for a four-year old daughter. The man she married fell ill and it will soon be four years since he died. She grew up in Ambohimena, a suburb to the south of Antsirabe, but when she married she moved to her husband’s family, who live near the big market in the city. When her husband died she continued to use two rooms at his

family's home, and for the moment she is living there with her daughter.

“One shouldn't have more than two children”, Harimalala says. She is the seventh in a family of nine. Her family was never well off, and when her parents divorced when she was four, life became even more demanding for the children. The children lived with their mother and the family managed to prioritize sending the children to school. Harimalala finished junior high school but never passed her final exam. She tried various small jobs but without feeling that she succeeded in them. She decided to continue her education and was financially supported by the family to take a one-year course in sewing. This qualification led to a job in a free trade zone factory that produced textiles but after a year she lost the job as the factory was closed down. A few years after this, Harimalala got married and she and her husband agreed that she should not work outside the home after that. He would look after the household economy, as was the custom, and she would do the housework and the cooking. The husband sold hens in the capital, Antananarivo, which provided an income they could live on.

When her husband died Harimalala was left with nothing, and had to find a new job. Her mother had died some years before and Harimalala felt she had few people who could help her. She began to take in washing for people but that gave little income for herself and her daughter. Harimalala was in despair and did not know what to do. Her father had gotten married again many years earlier and had moved to Antananarivo, and so she decided after a time to go to him and ask whether they could live there for a while. She soon understood that her father's new family could not support her. There were already many in the household: her father, stepmother and younger siblings, and it was too much to provide for her and her little daughter as well. Her

father advised her to go back to Antsirabe and try to find work there. Harimalala was worried and had no idea how this would work out. She had already tried to find a livelihood there, but without success.

“The Diaconal Center saved me”, Harimalala says. She saw it as an answer to her prayers when she sent an application to the Diaconal Center. She had heard about the Center through the church she belonged to and she thought she fulfilled the criteria: unemployed, young, and a single mother with some education. She gained a place and began the compulsory course in general education: how to present oneself when seeking work, how to manage time and money, how to receive customers, bring up children, and about hygiene and nutrition. But what sort of work should she go for to bring in an income? Harimalala’s father advised her to start her own pizza shop. He could help her build her own oven, he said, and he had learnt something about pizza-baking when he had worked at one of the hotels in the capital so he could show her. Harimalala was given a place on a three-month baking course, as advised by the Diaconal Center. The Center then gave her help with the expenses for building the oven and buying the necessary kitchen equipment for setting up her own pizza and bakery business. At the same time as Harimalala had a place at the Diaconal Center, her daughter had a place at the Center’s kindergarten, so that she had the days free to concentrate on the course and running the new bakery.

Harimalala gets up at three or four in the morning to make the dough for the day’s pizzas and pies. By 10.00 am she is ready with newly-baked wares and positions herself outside the city’s public swimming pool to sell the small round pizzas and pies. “There is demand for my new

pizzas and everything is sold”, she tells us proudly. Harimalala sells sixty pizzas and pies every day for 300 Ariary each, and on Saturdays and Sundays and during the school holidays there are even more young people who go swimming, and then she can sell up to a hundred. Her pizzas are also very popular in the city and often there are other buyers who ask for her pizzas. If there are orders from others, she has entered into an agreement with another woman who buys her pizzas for 200 Ariary and sells them on for 300 Ariary. It is not possible for her to go all over the whole city and so she has chosen to stay at her strategic spot by the swimming pool. Even so, she reckons she still makes a profit this way. She has noticed that her good sales create competition between the sellers outside the swimming pool, and some of them are jealous of her, she thinks. This is shown by the fact that, for example, some of the other sellers refuse to change larger notes for her when she needs small change.

Harimalala has long working hours and is not home before four or five in the afternoon. By then she has usually sold her pizzas and pies and has prepared the purchase of ingredients for tomorrow’s baking. She uses flour, eggs, yeast, oil, minced meat, tomatoes, onions, paprika and cheese for the pizzas, and strawberries, apples or other fresh fruit as filling for the pies. She buys what she needs from a wholesaler in the city, and once a week goes out of town to buy wood for a reasonable price. She buys a cartload which she uses as fuel for her oven. Harimalala regrets that she does not have mains electricity in the house where she bakes. “I could have done with a fridge”, she thinks. On some days she makes other cakes which she tries out for sale, as well as cakes for parties and weddings. Then she would have liked to have had a fridge to keep the cakes in, and if the cakes didn’t sell, she could use some of the ingredients for yoghurt, which would be put in the fridge. She could also do with more cake tins and other kitchen equipment. But

although Harimalala is aware of the possibilities for extending her business, she is very grateful for what she has achieved so far. “I have succeeded with my small business”, she says.

Harimalala has learnt to manage for herself and she has learnt at the Diaconal Center how to take care of her daughter. She has also learnt the importance of prioritizing education for her children.

“My goal for the future is a house of my own”, says Harimalala. She and her daughter live in the house belonging to her husband’s family but it is not in her husband’s name. She is worried that one day the family will need the house for themselves. “My other goal is that my daughter will have a good education and succeed”. Her daughter has just begun at a private primary school. Harimalala wants her to have the best opportunities in life and the best foundation for that is at a private school, she thinks. “Generosity and charity were some of the values we learnt on the course”, Harimalala tells me. That is what she has tried to show in practice, by, for example, dropping by the Center with extra cakes and pies for young people who are trying to get their lives together. For Harimalala, the support she has received through the congregation has given her hope and faith in the future. As far as Harimalala is concerned, the good life is one that is put into the hands of Jesus every day, she says with a radiant and satisfied smile.

How Vulnerable Youth Create New Life Stories in an FBO-Context

My focus in this study has been on how people, when faced with violation of their basic human dignity, experience their struggle for livelihood and how they respond to their humiliating life conditions. My focus has also been how the diaconal work of the church upholds and protects human dignity by promoting human development. My theoretical perspective is based on the assumption that diaconal action is conditioned and challenged by religious, historical, social and

cultural constructions (Berger 1967:16). I take as a point of departure that religion and religious performance is socially constructed and is created through interaction and human practices originated in the social and cultural context people live in, and that this is maintained and changed over time. What is then the added value that faith-based organizations provide to the secular development project?

The need to link the execution of power among human beings to norms relating to human dignity is as old as society itself (Goldewijk and Gaay Fortman 1999:3). There is a general consensus that society should respect the human dignity of every individual as well as of people living together in communities. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) remains the most authoritative text defining human rights. Although notions of basic entitlements directly related to human dignity are found in many cultures and societies, the universality of the need for human rights implies that there are challenges related to the implementation of these rights. Poverty and starvation, health problems and unemployment are not caused only by resource limitations and the absence of well-functioning state institutions. It is processes through which individuals are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live that tend to result in lack of satisfactory livelihood. This is the context that challenges The Malagasy Lutheran Church (FLM) and this highlights the need for diaconal action, enabling the church to take part in improving the quality of life of Malagasy citizens (Policy for the Development Sector of FLM 2004).

While human dignity is related to health, housing, clean water, education and other social necessities, dignity is also a basic standard in itself. In situations where people are in dramatic

need of basic entitlements, and human rights are destroyed, human dignity is often all that people have left – life’s “bottom line” (Goldewijk and Gaay Fortman 1999:57). This was the situation for many of the young people I interviewed in Antsirabe. These young persons were in a position of humiliation and had a strong feeling of the fragile dimensions of existence as opposed to dignity as a fundamental standard for humanity. For FLM these challenges have resulted in the Diaconal Center populated with a motivated staff who clearly show how to create a way of living with scant resources.

Violations of human dignity are understood differently in different cultures and different contexts. From a Christian perspective, dignity characterizes each and every person simply because of his or her being human. Hence, dignity is a category of *being* (US Catholic bishops pastoral message 1986). This means that human existence as such implies respect for all other persons, no matter what their capacities or conditions of life (De Blois 1998). Human dignity is what brings respect and recognition. The protection of human dignity as the basic source and the fundamental standard of human rights is the point of departure of the diaconal actions of the FLM.

A major resource for such actions is people’s perceptions and worldviews, their cultures and religions. This may be called the moral foundation of society, a set of norms, rules and values, which make up the society’s road map and traffic rules (Øyhus 2010: 3). These values and norms make a coherent and functioning society. Religion plays a major role in the countries of the global South that struggle for improved living conditions. Purely secular interpretations of dignity are rather limited. Christian religion, as well as other religions, provides deeper sources

for understanding this foundation of human rights (Goldewijk and Gaay Fortman 1999:141). A living religious tradition is far more than a set of beliefs that hold it together; it is a community of faith that fuses belief, faith and action into an indivisible whole and produces what Pierre Bourdieu describes as *social capital*¹⁰ (Grenfell 2008).

Experience confirms that there are societal constraints to development, and that these constraints define which changes are desirable and which are not desirable according to the values, ideas and morals of the society. FBOs, as well as secular actors, are agents of change. They create changes in attitudes and values. Whether religious or secular, representing churches or secular organizations, development work has consequences for the world and the world view of people. Christians and religious actors do this through sharing its message verbally and by diaconal actions. I argue that Christian values and faith provide people with a strong motivation for change.

“With the help of God I have created a successful small business. Without my faith and without the will of God this would not have been possible.” (Harimalala). The faith basis of Christian FBOs gives an added value to people who strive for a changed life. Christian norms, attitudes and values form a moral basis on which individuals can build their life projects. Successful

¹⁰ Bourdieu defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu [1986] 2011).

processes of change take place when they interact with the moral foundation of both society and the individual.

The Diaconal Center contributes towards creating a new understanding of life and a new attitude of life. It helps the young people to see themselves as created in the image of God and puts them in a relationship to God that makes the idea of change possible. This is an added value, an important contribution of FBOs. The Malagasy Lutheran Church (FLM) currently finds itself in a context of political exception and high unemployment. Under such conditions, the diaconal action of the church has contributed to making new life stories happen by supporting young people, by making them believe in themselves, and by empowering them to set achievable goals for their lives. I argue that the one decisive factor that helps so many youths succeed in finding work and livelihood, is the spiritual, psychological and general formation they receive at the Center. As Justine says: “Without God helping me and giving me a new direction in life, this change in my living condition would not have been possible”.

Even though financial support and technical education is important, neither of these factors is decisive in themselves. The youths are systematically trained to view their life and their future as a project to be realized through specific goals, and to define a life project. As said in the course: “the useful before the fun” and “when a goal is set for your life, achieving it is easy”. Mihantra comments: “I realize that my Christian faith is important and helps me to reach my goals in life. I see that believing in God gives me strength and helps me achieve a good life.” A Christian identity is taught and stimulated by the Diaconal Center in Antsirabe. By stimulating the desire for a good life, they offer a counter-story to the events and processes of everyday reality. They

suggest broader perspectives, extensions of capabilities, and provide meaning and resources for a dignified life. The focus of the diaconal work of the church is people faced with the violation of their basic human dignity and how they themselves may be supported and inspired to respond to humiliation and unmet needs.

Post-modernity, with its mistrust of principles as such, implies that no objective standards of legitimacy are recognized and human rights are buried in cultural relativism. However, in the current situation of FLM, the church has chosen an intercultural approach between universalism and cultural relativism. The diaconal action of the church balances local and global elements in their performance of *diakonia*. It acknowledges the diverse roots of human rights in different social, cultural and religious contexts while relating local practices and languages of human dignity and rights to international standards and mechanisms for human rights implementation. Diaconal action seems to trigger irreversible processes both for the young people involved in their activities and for their families. This will have consequences for their value systems.

My research suggests the importance of values, and values seem to be underestimated in the debate about development in civil society. Development is not culturally neutral, but contains both explicit and implicit propositions and meanings that may change people's perception of reality. Development is also valued both positively and negatively at the same time, according to position and power relations in family and society. Youth who through the Diaconal Center have succeeded in improving their quality of life, engage in processes of change induced by the processes of training for income generating activities.

Local people's commitment to Christianity is related to values such as human dignity, ethics and fellowship. The Christian faith, and the security it gives, brings an added value to people's lives and represents an added value in itself. This means that the Lutheran church as an FBO represents values that add to the secular development project. FBOs are based on values that in a developmental context make a difference on the individual level but also differ from values in secular development work. Christian faith and values are a strong motivating force for change. These organizations represent added value and are important in the diaconal work to uphold human dignity.

References Cited

Berger, Peter L. (1967). *The Social Reality of Religion*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.

Bourdieu, Pierre (2011 [1986]). "The Forms of Capital." In Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy, eds. *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*. Malden. MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 81-93.

Clarke, Gerard (2006). "Faith Matters: Faith Based Organizations, Civil Society and International Development". *Journal of International Development* 18:835-848.

Clarke, Gerard (2007). "Agents of Transformation? Donors, Faith-based Organizations and International Development". *Third World Quarterly* 28/1:935-848.

Clarke, Gerard (2008). "Faith-Based Organizations and International Development: An Overview". In G. Clarke and M. Jennings, eds. *Development, Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations. Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 17-45.

De Blois, Matthijs (1998). "Self-Determination or Human-Dignity: The Core Principle of Human Rights". In Mielle Bulterman, Aart Hendriks and Jacqueline Smith, eds. *To Baehr in Our Minds: Essays on Human Rights from the Heart of the Netherlands*. Utrecht: Netherlands Institute of Human Rights.

FLM (2004). *Policy for the Development Sector of FLM*. Antananarivo, Madagascar: Malagasy Lutheran Church.

Furseth, Inger (2006). *From Quest for Truth to Being Oneself. Religious Change in Life Stories*. New York: Peter Lang.

Goldewijk, Berma Klein and Bas de Gaay Fortman (1999). *Where Needs Meet Rights: Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in a New Perspective*. Geneva: WCC Publications.

Grenfell, Michael, ed. (2008). *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*. Stocksfield: Acumen.

Gullestad, Marianne, ed. (1996). *Imagined Childhoods. Self and Society in Autobiographical Accounts*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.

Lutheran World Federation (2003). *Prophetic Diakonia: "For the Healing of the World"*. Report, Johannesburg, South Africa, November 2002. Geneva: Lutheran World Federation.

Lutheran World Federation (2009). *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment. A Lutheran World Federation Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Diakonia*. Geneva: Lutheran World Federation.

Malagasy Lutheran Church (2011). *Diakonia Work in Antsirabe, Soritr'asa Diakonaly Loterana* (SDL). Annual Report. Antsirabe, Madagascar.

Marshall, K. and L. Keough (2004). *Mind, Heart and Soul in the Fight against Poverty*. Washington D.C.: The World Bank.

Marshall, K. and Marisa Van Saanen (2007). *Development and Faith. Where Mind, Heart, and Soul Work Together*. Washington D.C.: The World Bank.

Norwegian Church Aid (2009). *Together for a Just World. Working to Uphold Human Dignity 2005-2009*. Oslo: Norwegian Church Aid Global Strategic Plan.

Norwegian Mission Society (1996). *A Document Outlining the Fundamental Principles Guiding NMS' Profile in the Area of Diakonia. Practical Christian Lifestyle Facing Today's Challenges*. Stavanger: Norwegian Mission Society.

Soritr'asa Diakonaly Loterana – SDL. (2012). *Action diaconales pour les jeunes marginalizes et les femmes marginalisées avec enfants à charge dans la region d'Antsirabe*. [Diaconal action for marginalized youth and marginalized women with responsibility for children in the Antsirabe region]. Project Document 2008-2012. Antsirabe: Malagasy Lutheran Church.

United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.
<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>, accessed February 3, 2012.

United Nations. (2001). *Millennium Development Goals*.
<http://www.beta.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/mdgoverview.html>, accessed February 3, 2012.

United Nations Development Programme. (2011), *Human Development Report. 2011*. New York: United Nations.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (1986). *Economic Justice for All*. Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the US Economy. Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. http://www.usccb.org/upload/economic_justice_for_all.pdf, accessed October 9, 2013.

U.S Department of State (2012). *Roadmap for Ending the Crisis in Madagascar*. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5460.htm>, accessed January 26, 2012.

USA International Business Publications (2001). *Arab League League of Arab States Business Law Handbook*. Vol.1. Washington D.C.: World Strategic and Business Information Library.

Uvin, Peter (2004). *Human Rights and Development*. Bloomfield: Kumarian Press.

Øyhus, Arne Olav (2010). *Religion, Development and Aid, with Focus on the Norwegian "Discourse"*. Paper presented at the conference: Religion and Development, 8. November, Oslo, Norway.