Transcript of conversation between Louise Williams and Doris Horn

Louise Williams (LW) and Doris Horn (DH), former presidents of DIAKONIA World Federation, talked with each other at the DIAKONIA Executive Committee meeting at Kaiserswerth, Germany in July 2014.

LW: Doris, when did you attend your first DIAKONIA World Federation meeting?

DH: I attended the 1994 DRAE regional assembly in Sterling, Scotland. At my first world assembly in Friedrichroda, Germany, I helped provide first aid, and I distributed earphones. It was there that I was chosen as a DRAE representative, and my first Executive Committee meeting was in Basel, Switzerland. That is where I met Louise, and a vivid memory of mine was when the Executive Committee ate at the Blind Cow, a restaurant where you eat in total darkness. Not all of our members were comfortable with this.

LW: When I joined the Executive Committee, the majority of members spoke German. Doris, who had lived in England and who was fluent in both English and German, was a great help to me because I could not understand German.

My first meeting was at Berne with Sister Inge from Sweden. I remember her talking about DIAKAID. I did not understand the talk about chickens and cooo's, which I thought meant pigeons until I finally understood that it was cows!

DH: Louise, as president, introduced the practice of greeting each member of the Executive Committee in his or her own language. And I remember the huge ice creams we had when Janie Martin was the DRAE President.

LW: The use of language has always been an interesting issue given our cultural differences. I remember at Sterling when Chita was president she had a phrase "What is the pleasure of the body?" And Sister Hanna, the secretary at that time, was always keen to correct our grammar.

Systems have also changed and evolved. In Brisbane, there was no secret ballot, and voting was done in the full assembly. Janie and I left and waited outside the meeting room. We had to come back into the assembly to find out who had been elected. There had been a suggestion of a job share, but in the end I was elected.

DH: Yes, the voting was difficult in Atlanta with many rounds of ballots because there were six candidates. This was so stressful that it led to a change in the bylaws.

The original constitution and bylaws came from a time when there were strong national feelings in post-war Europe. Thankfully we are now in a very different place. I was not raised myself with those nationalistic feelings, and so it was difficult for me to understand.

My best memories are from as my time as regional president of DRAE. It was so good to visit the various member groups, and the connections I made are still strong.

LW: I too am so grateful when, in the prayers of the Church, I can reflect on so many rich relationships with individuals and groups around the world.

Question: Have the issues for DIAKONIA changed?

DH and LW: Communication. In the early days, there was no Facebook. The fastest communication was by fax.

There is now a different sense of what our purpose is. Now we have a greater sense of relating and supporting members at the grass roots level. In the first DIAKONIA assemblies, the directors (usually men) and assistant presidents were the people who related to each other, but now the kinds of people holding office have changed and the expectation that all members live in motherhouses has also changed.

In 1974/5, Sister Anna became the first woman President of DIAKONIA.

LW: In 1982, the WCC document 'Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry' changed the landscape of our churches and of how we related and understood one another at all levels.

Question: Did the diversity of the membership and churches see new expressions?

DH: At first when the member group leaders came together, there was as sense of reserve and of competition. This caused less openness.

LW: In Atlanta (2009), a decision was made to invite leaders of member group organizations back to engage and think about the future.

LW: Another change I have experienced is that in my first Executive Committee meeting, I felt like a visitor to a European organization. Over time, it now feels more like a world organization, and meeting in different places and holding assemblies in the regions has been key to this. In 1972, we met in New York: it was the first time that we met outside Europe.

DH: Another change in meetings and assemblies is that, except for Sundays, hardly anyone is wearing a uniform. This reflects the changing nature of the member organizations.

LW: Also what we do when we meet has changed. There is more Bible study and more papers on the practice of diakonia but less focus on the theology of the diaconate. I always remember lots of singing, but in the past I remember the people of DIAKONIA not talking but being talked to.

DH: In the past, when communication was more difficult, reports had to be shared and this led to long business sessions. The world assembly was the time to communicate reports of the different member organisations in this way.

LW: When I was first on the Executive Committee, we spoke in two languages - German and English - and at assemblies even some French. A change in Dutch law meant we had to make changes in the constitution to comply. Some of those conversations were amazing as each group had a different way of coming to an agreement. Discussions were limited and difficult because language and cultural terms of reference and basic understanding were so different.

Question: Can you give one challenge and one hope DIAKONIA faces in the next 10 years?

LW: Mission to the margins and movement from the margins - How do we allow them to better shape what we are about. We realized this when we struggled with the scale of member fees. How do we value the voice of the groups unable to pay fees? How do we encourage the voice and the participation of member groups such as those from South America, Asia, and Africa that so enrich us and our life together.

DH: How do we value, respect, and serve each other? Teaching in our schools of nursing now has changed in that we are serving a diverse group of students. Plus there are important new subjects for our work, for instance, ethics. Institutions are changing. How do we reach out to people where they are and bring them together?

Most people here are grey headed. How do we encourage the next generations and address the question, "Why are we here and what is our purpose and future"?

One hope . . . When I was first an Executive Committee member, I felt we were not open and were working at different levels, but now we are clearer about common goals and our purpose is more evident.

DIAKONIA holds for the Church its purpose for being and, in the future, holds the focus on people lest the Church forgets.

LW: People in our world are more polarized, grouping themselves with people with similar thinking. The world needs examples of something different . . . people who cross boundaries. There are disagreements in our churches, but we need to come to these with a strong undergirding of a worldwide community. Our world assemblies - however expensive - change people. Virtual conferencing is good and necessary, but it does not replace face-to-face talking.

DH: I brought a parable The Humming Bird, which I feel is useful to us now.

LW: Thanks for Doris, who as an ant (reference to parable) is a valued industrious person.

DH: I am coming to a time of being on the margins - hopefully with more time to listen and to prepare for retirement . . . a time that is best for seeing what is needed and for getting others involved.

Question: Louise, what type of animal are you?

LW: Not an ant, but more of a sheep dog. That comes from growing up on a farm that shaped my work style and an ethic of working hard but also knowing how to rest. Another animal from the farm is a work horse.

Sandy Boyce, current DIAKONIA president, speaking on behalf of the Executive Committee, thanked Louise and Doris for the sharing they did and for their valuable contribution to the gathering.