Northern Synod

TASK TEAM DIACONATE

Report

1. Assignment

The SSC approves the Task Team Diaconate and instructs it to reflect on effective and sustainable diaconate in this time.

2. Members of the Task Team

Initial Task Team :

Wynand van Niekerk (convenor), Paul Grobler, Rehan Rheeder, Hannes Knoetze, and Nioma Venter.

Delegation to the conference:

Wynand van Niekerk, Paul Grobler, Rehan Rheeder, Ronél Aylward, Danie Janse van Rensburg, Riaan Odendaal, Nicky Hattingh, Charlene Grobler, Francois Esterhuizen and Carli Fourie.

3. Execution of the assignment

3.1. Background

The need arose to reflect on the diaconal ministry in the region of the Northern Synod. The need was due to various factors. Challenges and questions include, the following, among other things:

- We live in a time with a wide range of serious challenges in our society. This includes things like unemployment, poverty, inequality, and gender-based violence. What should the church focus on? Does the Northern Synod have a clear diaconal vision?
- What are congregations doing regarding diaconal ministry?
- What needs do congregations have when it comes to support of their diaconal ministries?
- There are several gaps and challenges in the communication and collaboration between congregations, presbyteries, and the synod on the one hand, and our professional social work organisations, such as the SCMM,

CSCN [Christian Social Council North] and service organisations on the other. Much of this communication in the past was the work of the SCMM [Synodal Commission for the Ministry of Mercy) which ended around 1994. The SCMM was a commission of the synod that managed the diaconal mandate in collaboration with the presbyteries (PCMM—Presbyterial Commissions for the Ministry of Mercy). The SCMM was also the link between the SCMM, CSCN and service organisations. The possibility of a present-day diaconal task team, or something similar that can take up these responsibilities, must be investigated.

- Several congregations and presbyteries do have effective diaconal ministries, and several have established their own non-profit organisations. Is it possible to collaborate with them?
- There is enormous pressure on the non-profit sector due to decreasing state subsidies, lack of support, etc. This threatens the sustainability of the Northern Synod's professional social services.
- Rules and regulations for social services about geographical jurisdiction create several challenges for synodal borders versus provincial borders.

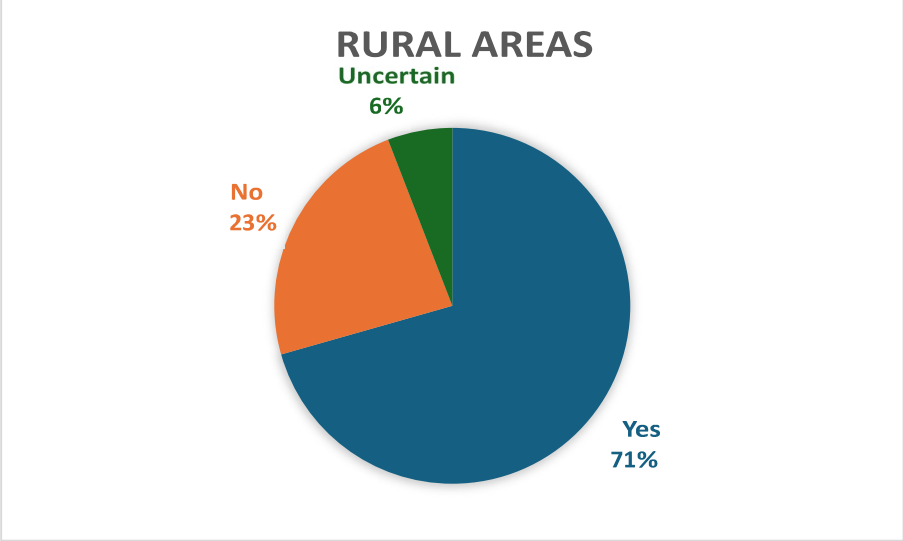
3.2. Research

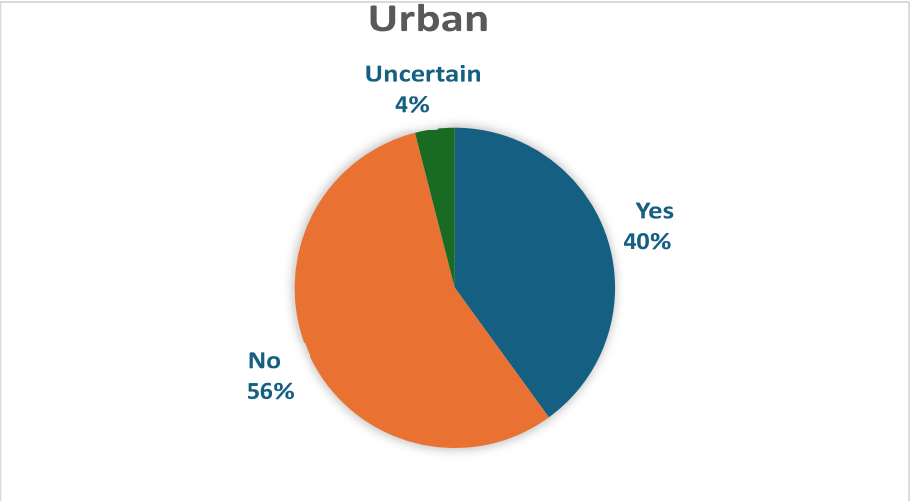
In November 2024 research was done to determine how matters stood with congregations' diaconal ministries, and also what possible needs and opportunities these presented. A questionnaire was sent to all the congregations in the synod and 42 completed it (a response rate of 38.5%). At least one congregation from every presbytery completed the questionnaire. The outcomes highlighted in this report were the following:

3.2.1. Some congregations establish their own non-profit organisations (NPOs)

There is a clear tendency in these congregations towards connected non-profit organisations (NPOs). They have either established the NPOs themselves or they liaise primarily with them. These organisations are not traditional synodal organisations like the CSC or Rest Resorts. This is especially the case in rural areas.

These congregations and their linked NPOs are not inclined to employ social workers.



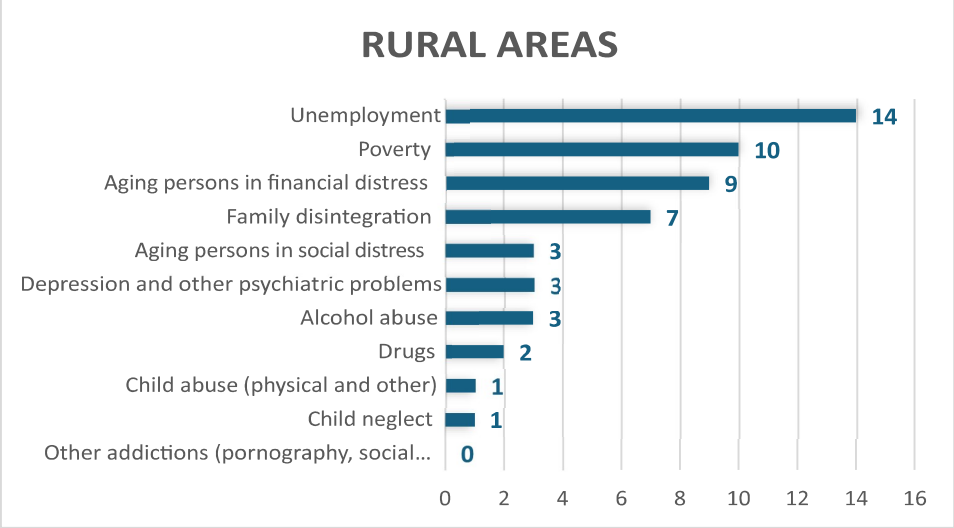


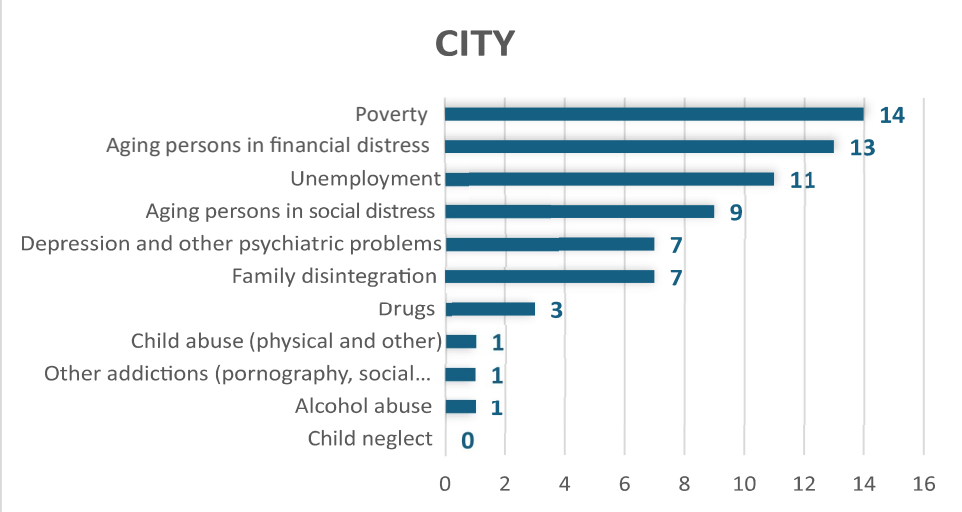
3.2.2. Professional social services are important

These congregations need the DR Church in the Northern Synod to provide specialised social services. Congregations also tend to support their local CSC financially. According to these congregations, their greatest needs pertain to diaconal work:

- Care for aging persons
- Support for household crises

- Job creation projects





3.2.3. Other general conclusions

Several other aspects were pointed out:

- Congregations are inclined to work in diaconal networks.
- The Northern Synod can help with the following:
  - financial support
  - training and equipping
  - networks
  - clarification of the role of the CSC

3.3. Diaconal conference

In 2026 the SSC took the next step with an instruction to a task team to reflect further on an effective and sustainable diaconate.

The initial task team decided that the Northern Synod should not reflect on these challenges in isolation. Several of these challenges are experienced everywhere in the NG Church but also in other ecclesial social service organisations, therefore the Eastern Synod, Highveld Synod, and Goudland Synod were approached for a joint conference. The Synod of the Northern Cape heard of the conference and asked to attend as observers.

On 16 and 17 September 2026 the Diaconal Conference was presented at eMseni. 42 delegates from the five synods attended. The conference allowed for time for the delegates to listen to one another and to reflect together about the church's calling to make hope, care, and justice visible in communities.

The following were some of the themes discussed at the conference:

- the history of the church's diaconate since the Transvaal Synod was established in 1866;
- the current structures and ministry models of the synod's service organisations;
- the broader welfare and social development landscape;
- the national development plan;
- the deficient relations between 'church and organisation';
- alternative funding models.

There were also presentations and conversations with ecumenical partners about their diaconal models, challenges, and strong points.

Although the conference was not directed at final decisions, it began an important process of discernment. The following were the principal conclusions:

3.3.1. 'Church + Organisation' = Church

One important theme, repeated throughout, was that 'church and organisation' are a unit and that collaboration is important. Congregations, presbyteries, synods, social organisations, children's homes, homes, rehab centres, etc. are all different

configurations of the same church. There is no we-and-you. We are all occupied with the work of the church.

3.3.2. We have to think anew about the structure of our diaconal ministry

A second important theme was a possible new approach to our fragmented and expensive structures, so that effective diaconal service can be provided with better interaction between 'church and organisation'. This cannot happen overnight, and it is not yet clear what the alternative will look like. The first step is establishing a mutual dream wherewith the church can approach her diaconal ministries.

3.3.3. Each contributes something precious

In the third place it was clear that the church has a big footprint that affects many people's lives, and synods, presbyteries, congregations, and organisations contribute to it. There was a clear realisation that 'church and organisation' need one another. Both have a unique and important contribution.

3.4. Focus areas

The delegates also identified four focus areas that need attention in the coming term:

- a shared dream for our diaconal ministry;
- rethinking current structures that do not empower but paralyse;
- better communication and support between synods, presbyteries, congregations, and institutions;
- collaboration with other ecumenical partners.

3.5. The road ahead

The delegates experienced this conference as a historical moment. This is the first time since the unbundling of the Transvaal synods around 2002 that official delegations of all four synods gather to reflect strategically about the diaconate.

The delegates characterised the event as a first step in a new chapter. The opportunities that can result from the continuation of this process can be of inestimable value. The discussion will not end here. The focus areas and other obstacles must be investigated further, and practical action plans must be developed.

3.6. Further action

It would be desirable for the SSC in the new term further to investigate a new system of collaboration, communication, vision and support between the different configurations of the church's diaconal ministries.

See also the following Appendices:

• CSC North • SCMM Company