

Course Syllabus
TH 602, Theology of
Diakonia Fall 2026

Instructor:	Rev. Hyuk Cho, ThD. E-mail: hcho@vst.edu
Office Location:	VST room 420
Office Hours:	Please feel free to reach out if you'd like to schedule a time to talk. To make an appointment, you can contact me either in class or via email so we can arrange a time that works for both of us.
Class Dates and Times:	Tuesdays, 9:00 am to 12 noon

❖ Course Description

Diakonia—often translated as service or servanthood—has long been regarded as a hallmark of Christian life and ministry. Yet the conventional language of servanthood, shaped by patriarchal, colonial, and Eurocentric theological traditions, has frequently obscured issues of power, limited the agency of marginalized communities, and upheld hierarchical missionary patterns. This course reconsiders *diakonia* through decolonial, intercultural, and feminist perspectives, inviting students to recover its theological depth and re-envision its role in contemporary Christian witness.

Drawing on *Decolonizing Diakonia: From Servanthood to Companionship* (Cho & Park, 2025), the course traces the historical evolution of *diakonia* from its early Christian meaning as a commissioned, go-between participation in God's mission to its later domestication as humble service. Attention is given to the contributions of women's *diakonia*, the impact of Christendom and colonial mission history, and the intercultural dynamics that continue to shape global Christianity.

Central to the course is the missiology of Katharine Hockin, whose theology of companionship offers a transformative alternative to servanthood. Through engagement with feminist theology, postcolonial theory, and testimonies from marginalized communities, students will explore emerging models of relationality and solidarity. Class discussions, case studies, and contextual reflections will illuminate how *diakonia* can be practiced as companionship—a shared journey of justice, mutual transformation, and participation in God's mission.

❖ Prerequisites

Normally, students have completed at least one graduate course in Theology or equivalent (TH500 or equivalent).

❖ Texts

- Cho, Hyuk & JungHee Park. *Decolonizing Diakonia: From Servanthood to Companionship*. Peter Lang, 2025.
- ◆ Collins, John N. *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- ◆ Collins, John N. *Diakonia Studies: Critical Issues in Ministry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- ◆ Koet, Bart J. *The Go-between: Augustine on Deacons*. Brill, 2019.
- ◆ Nesson, Craig L., and Darryl W. Stephens, eds. [*Diaconal Studies: Lived Theology for the Church in North America*](#). Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2024.
- ◆ Ampony, Godwin, Martin Büscher, Beate Hofmann, Félicité Ngnintedem, Dennis Solon, and Dietrich Werner, eds, [*International Handbook on Ecumenical Diakonia: Contextual Theologies and Practices of Diakonia and Christian Social Services – Resources for Study and Intercultural Learning*](#). Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2021.
- ◆ World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance. [*Called to Transformation – Ecumenical Diakonia*](#). Geneva: WCC Publications, 2022.
- ◆ Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 2000. (Original work published in 1970.)

Additional readings will be available on the library reserve or provided online through Populi.

❖ Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Interpret biblical and theological foundations of *diakonia* using intercultural, feminist, and decolonial frameworks.
2. Analyze the historical relationship between diakonia and colonialism, including the theological legitimation of empire, patriarchy, and missionary paternalism.
3. Critically evaluate women's *diakonia* in Scripture and mission history, attending

- to voice, agency, and resistance.
4. Articulate a theology of *diakonia* as companionship, grounded in mutuality, in-betweenness, shared power, and intercultural encounter.
 5. Demonstrate decolonial theological reflection, identifying and challenging colonial desire, racialized assumptions, and dominant mission paradigms.
 6. Engage diverse cultural and social contexts with humility and intercultural competence, cultivating practices of accompaniment rather than service.
 7. Construct contextual ministry proposals that embody decolonizing *diakonia* in congregational, community, or intercultural settings.

❖ Class Format

This class meets for three hours each week over a span of 11 weeks. The main structure will consist of lectures and student presentations. Lectures aim to introduce, clarify, connect, and expand on the context and content of the readings to help students integrate the course materials with their own theological understanding and spiritual practices. During class, case studies and problem-solving activities will be used to deepen and enrich our theological imagination and promote a transformation in our spiritual practices.

This is a hybrid course. Online students will engage with the professor and class online using Zoom. The Zoom link will be uploaded to Populi for synchronous students, and a link to the recording of the class will also be posted to Populi for asynchronous students following the class.

❖ Expectations and Assignments

1. **Reading and assignments:** You are expected to read all “Core Readings” **before** class and to complete assignments as outlined in the syllabus within the specified dates of the course and term.
2. **Academic honesty:** You are expected to adhere to VST’s requirements for academic honesty as published in the Student Handbook.
3. **Inclusive language:** In speaking and writing, inclusive language is expected when making reference to humans and a variety of metaphors are anticipated when making reference to God.
4. **Regular attendance and informed participation** in class is an important part of the learning experience. Because discussion is a key part of the class, nurturing an engagement with course materials, your questions and comments are valued and

will be a factor in the overall grade. To this end, it is expected that you will have done the readings and be prepared to contribute. Careful and critical reading is fundamental to informed participation. More than three absences may result in loss of course credit.

Synchronous students are required to be visible (i.e. in person) at all times during the class; failure to be visible will result in the need to write a précis of the lecture for the parts where not visible.

Class Presentation. At a class session, student(s) will initiate discussion by referring to salient points in the week's reading assignments, mainly from the primary sources, raising two or three questions to generate conversation over important issues/themes. The presentation should be approximately 12-15 minutes. For two people's presentations, do not exceed 20 minutes.

In your presentation, consider the following **guiding questions**. You can use these questions for your reflection papers for certificate students.

- a. Who is the author (for Hyuk's material, you can skip this), and what is the context of the text? What is at stake?
- b. What is the main issue or problem addressed, what is the argument/thesis and how is it developed?
- c. What is the 'starting point' and source of authority (consider the Wesleyan Quadrilateral - scripture, tradition, reason and experience)?
- d. How do you respond, and why?
- e. Whose voices are missing in the text, and if so, what difference might it make?

5. **Book Review**, approximately eight pages in length, is due no later than **November 3, 2026** in class. Its primary purpose is to foster a critical engagement with a book chosen from the selection provided (see handout) and assess it in terms of course materials and themes, and in light of your own critical perspective.

Please refer to <https://guides.library.ubc.ca/c.php?g=720693&p=5151727>

6. **One (1) final integrative paper due on Monday, December 22, 2026.** This paper should focus on a topic or issue germane to the course and investigate, analyze, and appraise its implications in a contemporary context. The assignment is both integrative and research-oriented; it offers the flexibility to research a topic or issue that interests you, while also requiring you to assess the relevance of your research to some of the materials read/discussed during the course, drawing

your own conclusions in the process. The final paper should be typed in a double space format, Times New Roman, 12pt font and 1-inch margins.

Diploma Students: Eight (8) journal entries or reading reflections
Diploma Students should submit a total of 8 reflection papers until week 10. The 450– 500 word paper must be submitted by Wednesday midnight PST). Creative engagement with the required reading(s), lecture, and ongoing discussion are expected. It is not meant to be a summary of the readings. This one (1) page paper should be typed in a single space format, Times New Roman, 12pt font and 1- inch margins.

Basic Degree Students (M.Div., MAPPL and MATS: about 3,750 words (exclusive of footnotes and bibliography) with a research depth of 10-15 entries beyond course texts plus eight (8) journal entries or reading reflections.

Advanced Degree Students (Th.M): about 5,000 words (exclusive of footnotes and bibliography) with a research depth of 15-20 entries beyond course texts plus eight (8) journal entries or reading reflections.

❖ Course Schedule

Week 1 — Introduction: What Is *Diakonia*? Why Theology Matters

- Overview of course themes, aims, and assignments
- Introduction to *diakonia* as a theological concept
- The problem: how “servanthood” became the dominant paradigm
- Contemporary ministry challenges that require rethinking *diakonia*
- Introduction to decolonial and intercultural approaches

Core Readings:

- Cho & Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, Introduction
- 1.1. Collins, *Diakonia Studies*, Chapters 1 and 3

Week 2 — Classical and Biblical Concept of *Diakonia*

Note: Not exegetical; no scripture study—focus on scholarship.

- Overview of the *diakon*-word group
- John N. Collins and the shift from “service” to “go-between/agency”
- Implications for understanding early Christian mission
- How “service language” became spiritualized and domesticated over time
- The influence of Greco-Roman social, political, and patronage systems on early Christian diakonia

Core Readings:

- Cho & Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, Chapter 1
- 2.1. Collins, *Diakonia*, Chapters 4
- 2.2. Collins, *Diakonia Studies*, Chapter 5
- 2.3. Koet, *The Go-between*, Chapter 2

Week 3 — Women’s *Diakonia* in Early Christian and Historical Contexts

- Women as leaders, patrons, and agents of *diakonia*
- How patriarchal theology minimized their agency
- Feminist theological critiques
- Re-evaluating women’s *diakonia* as missional leadership
- Recovering marginalized voices through the hermeneutics of suspicion

Core Readings:

- Cho & Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, Chapter 3
- 3.1. Collins, *Diakonia*, Chapter 14
- 3.2. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, Chapter 5
- 3.3. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity*, Chapter 7

Week 4 — The Historical Development of *Diakonia* in Western Christianity: Beguines

- Rise of institutional charity and professional care
- The Beguines as an alternative diaconal imagination
- Women’s communal life outside clerical and monastic control
- Mysticism, compassion, and embodied care as theological practice
- Tensions with ecclesial authorities and suspicion of women’s spiritual autonomy

Core Readings:

- Cho & Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, Chapter 4
- 4.1. Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, Chapters 2 and 3

Week 5 — The Historical Development of *Diakonia* in Western Christianity: Reformation

- Rise of institutional charity and professional care
- Reformation reinterpretations of diakonia
- Luther’s and Calvin’s reshaping of diaconal ministry
- Radical Reformation models of mutual aid and communal accountability
- How Reformation concepts of service and obedience informed colonial and missionary paradigms

Core Readings

- 5.1. Luther, “On the Freedom of a Christian” (1520)
- 5.2. Calvin, *Institutes*, Book IV.3.9–10, IV.4.5–7, IV.5.15–18, IV.6.9–10

- 5.3. Avila & Ryökäs, “The Church as Diaconia: A Reformed Understanding,” *Journal for the Study of Diakonia* 1S (2020), 20–35. <https://doi.org/10.37448/dt.84771>
- 5.4. Nesson, “A Lutheran Theology for *Diakonia* in North American Contexts,” in *International Handbook on Ecumenical Diakonia* (Oxford, 2021), 279–88.
- 5.5. Kjell Nordstokke, “The Study of Diakonia as Academic Discipline,” in *Diakonia as Christian Social Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Stephanie Dietrich, Knud Jørgensen, Kari Karsrud Korslien, and Kjell Nordstokke (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 171–84.

Week 6 — Women Missionaries’ Diakonia: Power, Colonialism, and Resistance

- Women missionaries in 19th–20th centuries
- Their leadership, influence, and limitations
- Intersection of gender, race, and empire
- Examples of resistance, solidarity, and intercultural agency
- Lessons for decolonizing *diakonia* today

Core Readings:

- Cho & Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, Chapter 5
- 6.1. Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility*, Chapters 5 and 7

Week 7 — Diakonia in Mission History: From Church to Others → Church with Others

- The disappearance of *diakonia* after Constantine
- Christendom, colonial expansion, mission as “civilizing”
- 19th/20th-century mission boards and the rise of service institutions
- WCC *missio Dei* developments and the recovery of *diakonia*
- How *diakonia* shapes the identity and direction of the church

Core Readings:

- Cho & Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, Chapter 2
- 7.1. Koet, *The Go-between*, Chapter 3
- 7.2. [WCC & ACT Alliance, Called to Transformation, Chapter 2 – 5.](#)
- 7.3. Cho, “Never-Ending Mission of God: The Evolution of the Concept of *Missio Dei* in Our Ever-Changing Landscape,” *International Review of Mission* 113, no 1 (May 2024): 173– 90.

Assignment Due: Book Review

Week 8 — Diakonia as Companionship

- Companionship as a missiological paradigm
- Moving from servanthood to mutuality
- The role of creativity, humility, and shared power

- Resonances with prophetic dialogue (Bevans & Schroeder)
- How companionship opens a new theological horizon

Core Readings:

- Cho & Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, Chapters 6–8
- 8.1. Hockin, “My Pilgrimage in Mission” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 12, no.1 (January 1988): 23–30.
- 8.2. Enns, “Toward an Ecumenical Theology of Companionship: The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace as a Kenotic Movement,” *The Ecumenical Review* 74, no. 2 (2022): 268-283.

Week 9 — Critiquing the Servanthood Model: Theology, Power, and Colonization

- Why servanthood is inadequate in postcolonial contexts
- How service language reinforces hierarchical relations
- Evaluating power: “power-for,” “power-over,” and “power-with”
- Connections with colonial desire and missionary paternalism
- Emerging models: mutuality, solidarity, accompaniment

Core Readings:

- Cho & Park, Synthesis of Chapters 1–5
- 9.1. Man-Hei Yip, “De-Subjugating the Servant Image as a Theo-Diaconal Intervention,” in *Diaconal Studies*, Chapter 10
- 9.2. Ritchie, “Beyond Help: diakonia in the Contemporary Church,” *Political Theology* 20 (2019), 631–42, DOI: 10.1080/1462317X.2019.1695404
- 9.3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Chapters 1 & 4

Week 10 — Unbinding Colonial Desire: *Diakonia* in Postcolonial Perspective

- Postcolonial critique of mission and servanthood
- Subaltern theory (Spivak), decolonial hermeneutics (Kwok Pui-Lan)
- Gendered and racialized distortions in Christian mission
- Hybridity as a site of diaconal transformation
- The role of Indigenous and global South voices

Core Readings:

- Cho & Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, Chapter 9
- 10.1. Cho, “Have You Eaten?: Decolonizing Theology in the Contexts of the Philippines and Korea,” *International Journal of Asian Christianity* 7, no 2 (August 2024): 191–213.
- 10.2. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”
- 10.3 Kwok, “Unbinding Our Feet: Saving Brown Women and Feminist Religious

Discourse” in Donaldson, L. E. & Kwok P. (eds.): *Postcolonialism, Feminism & Religious Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 62–81.

Week 11 — Toward a Decolonizing Theology of *Diakonia*

- Companionship as a theological model for *diakonia*
- *Diakonia* in the “in-between” spaces
- Intercultural church as a diaconal community
- Constructing new practices of accompaniment
- Final integrative vision for decolonizing *diakonia*

Core Readings:

- Cho & Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, Chapter 10 + Conclusion
- 11.1. [WCC & ACT Alliance, Called to Transformation, Chapter 6 – 10](#)

Assignment: Final Paper Due (December 22, 2026)