

CODE Forum 2026

Introduction to the Papers and Workshops

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Belonging Before Belief: How Secular Volunteers Encounter Christian Faith Through Diaconal Service

This presentation examines how secular volunteers encounter Christian faith through participation in diaconal work, particularly in secular and multifaith contexts. Across Europe, religious life is becoming both more plural and, in many places, more secular, so contact with the church often begins not with teaching but with shared practices of care. Diaconal organizations therefore become key spaces where people experience community, solidarity, and lived values, and where churches contribute to social innovation and local community development through collaboration with other actors.

Volunteering today is typically short-term and individualized, which requires churches and diaconal organizations to adapt by organizing for belonging through flexible structures, hospitable spaces, and strong relational networks. When volunteers are welcomed, valued, trusted, and empowered to use their talents, they develop a sense of “we” that sustains engagement and can open them to faith. Theologically, belonging is central: humans long to belong, ultimately to God. Diaconal practice responds to this longing by offering inclusive communities in which Christian faith is embodied before it is explicitly taught. Credibility depends on coherence between proclaimed values and lived practice. For some secular volunteers, empowered belonging is their first real encounter with the church and the Gospel, making “belonging before belief” a defining principle of diaconal identity and a foundation for genuine solidarity.