



WHITE PAPER:

Community Development and Caring for the Marginalized

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1. UNDERSTANDING MERCY

In Matt. 25 when Christ describes the final judgment in which the Son of Man will come with His angels to separate people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, Jesus points out that those who are of His Kingdom are in fact those who cared for others in need. We understand this is a matter of faith, a baptismal identity — Christ is King and those of His Kingdom show mercy. This mercy is centered on the cross, in which the Bread from Heaven is broken and given for the forgiveness of sins as true Food that gives salvation. Notice too in Matt. 25, that those in Christ's Kingdom are completely unaware that they clothed, visited and fed the King in this earthly life. That is until the King tells them that as they did it to the least of these brothers, they did it to Him.

This is important if we are to consider ourselves to be the “hands and feet” of Jesus. When showing mercy, it is easy to see ourselves as the king who helps those who are inferior to us or to look down on “those people” with a sense of superiority because we have our lives more in order. And yet, when we understand our place in the Kingdom, we quickly understand that we are citizens only because the King was willing to suffer and die in order to give over His Kingdom as an inheritance. Indeed we are poor miserable beggars. We are “those people” unworthy of such riches. And now as recipients of this undeserved mercy and love, we too distribute it freely as well.

When we sit at the table and look into the bloodshot eyes of a broken, addicted homeless person and he gives that toothless smile — although he is written off by society — we don't see some poor waif that we will lean down to help as if we are king. No, Jesus says as you have done to the least, you have done to Him. So instead of seeing a beggar, we see in that homeless person, Christ my King! This is the honored guest at my table. These misfits and outcasts are those who would sit at the table of Jesus. The very Kingdom belongs not to the mighty, who merely think they are the chosen ones, but sinners forgiven by grace through faith, chosen in Holy Baptism. And so too when you feed or clothe those who have been marginalized by society, you care for them as Christ did, in mind, body and soul. You give more than temporary aid to the body. You are showing that someone cares and you are giving eternal hope in Christ.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE, DIGNITY AND FREEDOM OF MERCY

Of course one can question if someone is truly in need or is simply “using” the church's charity. Indeed, the church must be wise in not enabling an unhealthy dependence. But it also should understand that God does not wait until someone is worthy of His mercy — something for which we should all be very thankful. To be sure, if someone asks for your shirt, you are called to give your coat as well. Why? Mercy is always connected to the church's ministry of Word and Sacraments. It is a part of our life together as the Body of Christ. And no program, secular or otherwise, can be transformative in the lives of sinners as are the means of God's grace.

As Lutherans, we understand the inherent value of every human life — a person who is so valued by God that He sent His Son into the World to save him or her. No matter how the world might view a person, we understand that the least will be first and that we are created in the image of the Creator. This is the basis for the dignity that should be afforded to all people. And that dignity includes the fact that each person has the capacity to serve his or her God-given purpose as citizens of communities in vocation. Just as conversion leads to freedom, mercy should not result in any form of compulsion or detrimental relationship of dependency. If need be, the church should fight for and be advocates for the marginalized so they too can make contributions. For those who suffer from addiction, mental illness, or a cycle of abuse or crippling disability, this may seem like an uphill battle. But it is one that we are called to fight.

3. UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE LCMS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

What then is the role of the church in the community development of our cities? Should we insulate ourselves from the world around us and simply pray that our decaying neighborhoods will improve? Or are we called to the vocation of actively involved corporate citizens? Indeed, many of our churches in the city are playing active roles at the center of neighborhood renewal. The church can be afforded the opportunity to help in both the planning and the implementation of revitalization. Local governments, agencies, corporations and churches can work collaboratively to develop both a quality of life plan and a theory of change to see the plan implemented. The church can assist with implementation in a wide variety of ways to build up the necessary infrastructure of a community. This can include housing, blight improvements, crime safety, job training, education, food ministry, cold shelters and the like. Of course, the church deals best individually through an ongoing relationship with someone. With this approach we can affect changes to develop stable home lives, re-entry into society, first-time home ownership or vocational training.

But to have a full renaissance in our struggling communities, it will take more than just job seekers. It requires jobs. This seems to be an elusive task despite the best efforts of governments, economists and developers alike. But could the church play a role as an economic catalyst in the creation of jobs? Is this not the intent of giving people dignity? They might not only receive help but they can become productive citizens in their communities. Some areas of our cities will be overlooked by business development due to crime and infrastructure. But could the church assist with small business capitalization? Could the church assist with not only helping someone to be a first-time home buyer, but perhaps becoming a first-time business owner, employing those who live in the community? Indeed this would require the assistance of specialists in the world of business and finance, but the LCMS could create a task force to develop entrepreneurial training from a Christian perspective that is anchored by our local altars.

Some congregations have already been responsible for job creation, unintentionally. For example, congregations might house a local child care center that employs staff or run a church related mercy operation that requires employees. Likewise, a church, through a separate nonprofit organization, can own businesses that allow for on-the-job training of “starter” jobs that will eventually help someone to become gainfully employed in an ongoing career. We have seen how Lutheran Housing Support has offered turnkey solutions to housing in our inner cities and our Gospel Seeds ministry has identified the needs in which a church can assist. There is no better time than now to find creative solutions for the LCMS to play a role in the development of business districts in overlooked communities. Key to this will be small business loans and developing business plans for viable enterprises that will attract consumers from beyond the confines of a community’s neighborhood. Again, the church needs to be involved if lives are to be truly changed physically and spiritually. The LCMS can assist in the incubation of small businesses that breathe life into dying cities. This is a clarion call for fresh new thinking and creative alliances with positive forces in the community to serve our neighbors in love, for the sake of the Gospel and the salvation of the lost.

4. THE NEW FACE OF MERCY

When we think of mercy, we typically think of those who have been called to care for the helpless in the midst of crisis, which demands emergency intervention. And no doubt Christ has called us to care for the least of these brothers in need, until the end of days, to save lives. However, we now know that our help also can have unintended consequences that are ultimately harmful when dealing with chronic poverty. This is what Robert Lupton, author of *Toxic Charity*, describes as a progression of one-way giving. The progression goes as such: 1 x = appreciation, 2 x = anticipation, 3 x = expectation, 4 x = entitlement, 5 x = dependency. This is not the result that anyone desires and it does not result in the dignity and freedom that everyone wishes to have. Much like the Hippocratic Oath for health care professionals, Lupton has crafted an oath for those who desire to help:

1. I will never do for others what they can do for themselves.
2. I will limit one-way giving to crises and seek always to find ways for legitimate exchange.
3. I will empower by hiring, lending and investing, and offer gifts sparingly as incentives to reinforce achievements.
4. I will put the interests of the poor above my own (or organization) self-interest even when it means setting aside my own agenda.
5. I will listen carefully for spoken and unspoken needs (knowing that many clues will be hidden).
6. Above all, to the best of my ability, I will do no harm.

This radically alters the face of mercy when we think of mercy not only in terms of aid and betterment, but also of helping to find ways to develop communities and individuals of all ages and backgrounds, regardless of abilities. Mercy then incorporates not only the social and health care spectrum of the laity, but also young professionals and retired corporate executives. And this

goes beyond the urban mission trip to offer aid, which again is vital, but it is not the complete view of mercy. Picture the retired executive who wishes to end his days in a life of significance by serving at the soup kitchen only to see the poverty needle remain steady. Picture the unemployed homeless person at the receiving end of the soup kitchen who is just looking for a chance to get back on his or her feet. Picture the father who has to step away as his children are handed the Christmas toys that he couldn't provide for them. Is this the picture of freedom and dignity of mercy that God desires?

Now picture when young professionals and retired corporate executives use their God-given vocations to work together with those in need to move them from aid to enterprise, through wealth generation and job creation. When poor and rich live side by side to improve and develop communities. When the person in need is seen as the solution to the community's development problems or human care needs. Every person has capacity, designed in the image of God, irrespective of abilities. This is the new face of mercy. It is not only one helping another, but everyone working in partnership and collaboration. The new face of mercy is a sea of diverse faces in community, loving their neighbors and caring for them in body and soul. This is seen in something as simple as two aging residents living together in a retirement community — perhaps one is the eyes for the other and in return one might be the legs — two Christians knitted together to be one body. Of course this is the understanding of communion in that we are made to be the one Body of Christ in community. True mercy will always have its genesis at the altar of the church, where Christ is brought to all who are in need. And from this mercy received — that gives forgiveness, life and salvation — will be an outpouring of love and charity that offers dignity and freedom to those in need. The new face of mercy addresses the hunger and thirst of body and soul by working together in *koinonia*. Pastors, deaconesses, doctors, nurses, social workers, young and old, blue and white collar, rich and poor alike — the table of duties in Godly vocation — this is the face of mercy.