

Faith Active in Love

Human Care in the Church's Life

A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations
of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

February 1999

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Human Care in the Church's Life

INTRODUCTION

The proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments create faith and thereby constitute and continually reconstitute the church, the body of Christ. The central task of the church, therefore, is to proclaim that Gospel by which it lives and through which the Holy Spirit seeks to draw all people into Christ's body.

Faith created by the means of grace is always active in love. "After a person has been justified by faith, a true living faith becomes 'active through love' (Gal. 5:6). Thus good works always follow justifying faith and are certainly to be found with it, since such faith is never alone but is always accompanied by love and hope" (FC Ep, III, 11). The Formula of Concord also cites Luther's vivid formulation in his introduction to Romans (1522):

Faith kills the Old Adam, makes us entirely different people in heart, spirit, mind, and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it. Oh, faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, so that it is impossible for it not to be constantly doing what is good. Likewise, faith does not ask if good works are to be done, but before one can ask, faith has already done them and is constantly active (FC SD, IV, 10–11).¹

¹ See Martin Luther, "Prefaces to the New Testament" (1546[1522]), *Luther's Works* (hereafter *LW*), American Edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press and St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 35:370.

The Board for Human Care Ministries of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has asked the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) to “reflect on the role of Christian care in the overall life of the Christian community.” Because the central task of the church is the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments, distinctively Christian care is likewise always centered in this task. But because faith is always active through love, questions about Christian care also lead us to ask how a Christian congregation organizes to help its members express the energetic love and hope that accompany a true living faith.

From the beginning we must guard against a nonbiblical soul/body dualism that sometimes infects our reflections on this question. Many religions and philosophies, both Eastern and Western, teach a radical distinction between a material, bodily life and a nonmaterial, soul or spiritual life in which the soul is viewed as good and the body as evil. In opposition to this view, the Bible teaches in the doctrine of creation and in the doctrine of redemption that God addresses us all as whole persons, both body and soul. Because of sin, the whole person is under God’s judgment. Because of Christ, the whole baptized person can confess faith in “the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting” (Apostles’ Creed).

The ministry of Word and sacraments, therefore, is addressed to the whole person, not merely to body or to soul. The forgiveness won by Christ and offered in the Gospel saves the whole person, body as well as soul. Consider, for example, Mark 2:2–12 which instructively links our Lord’s proclamation of forgiveness with the healing of the body, an anticipation of the resurrection.² Matthew 8:17 interprets Jesus’ healing ministry in the light of Isaiah 53: “This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, ‘He took our infirmities and bore our diseases’” (see also Matt. 11:1–6 and Isaiah 35). Christian care is finally and always addressed to the whole person redeemed by Christ.

Thus, the question we are to examine—how a Christian congregation organizes to help its members express the love and hope that accompany a true living faith—is not about caring only for bodily life. Persons who expect the resurrection of the body do not stop simply with meeting current bodily needs. Living faith, active in love, addresses the needs of whole persons, persons loved by those who know themselves loved by God in Christ.

A further focusing of the question before us requires that we examine how, in the presence of the church-constituting proclamation of forgiveness in Christ, believers (both individually and corporately) integrate their loving concern for the neighbor into the life of faith. It is in this sense that we speak of “human care” and “Christian care” in the church’s life and

² To be sure, God in His wisdom does not always remove the cross of physical suffering from His children in this life. Thus, the salvation of the body may not be apparent until the resurrection and renewal of the body (cf. 1 Cor. 15:47–49). The thief on the cross was saved though his body expired on the cross (Luke 23:43). Nevertheless, the account of Jesus’ saving activity shows that both body and soul are objects of salvation.

examine the necessary connections between this care and the church's Word and sacrament ministry.

Questions about Christian care in the Christian community are closely related to how a congregation organizes to help its members speak on issues of social concern. The Synod in 1983³ raised this question, and the CTCR's 1995 report *Render Unto Caesar . . . and Unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State* addressed the question in detail. This new report reflects on "the role of Christian care in the overall life of the Christian community" in the light of the 1995 report.

Two Contrasting Lines of Thought

The question before us is not *whether* Christian care, the active love and hope that accompany a true living faith, will characterize the Christian community. Such love simply does accompany faith. Rather, the issue is this: to what extent and on what basis will the church, organized corporately in congregations and in regional, national and international church structures, help its members express the love and hope that accompany a true living faith.

As a matter of fact, the church *has* in a variety of ways organized corporately to facilitate active expression of Christian care. The book of Acts and New Testament reports of Paul's collection for the poor in the Jerusalem church demonstrate that the church has cared for its widows and orphans and the poor from the beginning. Over the centuries churches have established great institutions of human care: hospitals, retirement homes, agencies of local and world relief, etc. As we have noted, the Synod currently maintains a Board for Human Care Ministries to assist all its members in the organized expression of Christian love.

The facts are plain. Not only have individual Christians been energetic in love that serves the neighbor, but the church has organized corporately to help its members express the active love and hope that accompany a true living faith. Two contrasting lines of thought in the Synod, however, challenge us concerning the way in which churches organize for Christian care.

1. One line of thought argues that the church should much more systematically organize itself for the provision of Christian care. This thinking urges
 - a. that Christians be much more systematically instructed in how to show Christian care as individuals, and
 - b. that the corporate life of congregations, Districts, and the Synod be more energetically organized to provide Christian care.

³ 1983 Res. 3-06A "To Encourage Peacemaking and the Study of Problems Concerning the Church and Nuclear Arms," *Convention Proceedings*, 155-56.

2. The other line of thought argues that the church acting corporately has no specific mandate and often lacks the competence to organize for the provision of Christian care. This thinking suggests
 - a. that the Christian care lived out by Christian individuals in their diverse callings in home, career, and community, is often minimized or overlooked by people who criticize the church for failing to instruct its members in Christian care, and
 - b. that pastors—called to proclaim the Gospel and administer the sacraments— and other church leaders have not been summoned by God also to organize institutional efforts to address social concerns. Indeed, even if pastors have wisdom for such efforts, they owe to their calling devotion “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

What are we to make of these contrasting lines of thought as we “reflect on the role of Christian care in the overall life of the Christian community”?

Some Scenarios

The following scenarios are described to help people reading and studying this report to think about the issues in a concrete way.⁴ The goal is that, on the basis of the biblical, theological reflection offered in this report, pastors and members of congregations will be able to assess the questions raised by the scenarios in a helpful way. At the end of this document the scenarios are once again presented along with further discussion questions and references to previous relevant sections.

1. A Parish Nurse Program

A group of congregations is deliberating whether to make funds available to hire a full-time registered nurse to implement health-related programs in the congregations. The proposed plan is that this person would do the following: keep tabs on members of the congregations whose health

⁴ The scenarios are more or less artificial, because they are designed to encourage discussion of key questions that arise around the topic of “Faith Active in Love.” Study of this report, however, also provides a good occasion for congregations to become informed about and review the actual human care initiatives undertaken by their own and other congregations. The Synod’s Board for Human Care Ministries exists to help congregations reflect on and organize human care initiatives. The Board compiles descriptions of current congregational and other cooperative programs and is happy to share those descriptions with congregations and pastors. Reflection on such examples provides another way for congregations to consider what might be appropriate for faith active in love in their time and place.

needs are perhaps not being met in a satisfactory way; conduct wellness classes for interested members; help members interact effectively with their physicians and hospitals; and in a limited way, make available some basic health care to people in need who live in range of the participating congregations.

Some persons in the congregations welcome this proposal as a sign that the church will finally be living the Gospel in a concrete and visible way. Others are critical of the proposal because they fear that it will obscure the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They also assert that the money involved would be better spent to support missionary proclamation, either locally or in a part of the world little touched by the Christian Gospel.

How should we think about these reactions to this proposal?

2. A Day Care Center Program

A medium-sized congregation is considering whether to establish and staff a day care center for preschool children. Many families both inside and outside the congregation need day care. Members are suggesting that the proposed center would meet a genuine human need, put children in a better environment than might be found in some secular centers, and provide a way that unbelievers would become better acquainted with the Christian community.

Many in the congregation are enthusiastic about the plan, but some are worried that people might become confused about the essentials of the Christian mission.

What do you think? How is this proposal similar to or different from a proposal to establish a Lutheran elementary or high school?

3. A Food Pantry

A small congregation maintains a food pantry for people unable to secure sufficient resources for their own or their families' meals. Since the pastor is the only person present at the church on a regular basis, he is the primary contact person for people bringing food and for those who volunteer to staff the pantry at designated hours. He also usually receives food pantry inquiries outside the designated hours. Since most members of the congregation work full-time, getting sufficient volunteers for the program is an ongoing challenge.

For the most part, the congregation is glad to sponsor this program, but some complain that it takes too much of the pastor's time away from his other tasks.

You have been asked to meet with the congregation and the pastor to discuss the project. What will you bring to the discussion?

4. Faith and Works

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has brought together persons committed to human care ministries from all of its Districts. At the meeting one presenter offers some comments in light of James 2:17—“So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

The speaker reports: “A year-long study conducted by Search Institute on ‘Congregations at Crossroads: A National study of Adults and Youth in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’ concluded that our church ‘needs to increase its efforts to help members make the connection between the church’s teachings and the way Lutherans live out their daily lives’ (*Reporter*, October 1995). Out of approximately 1800 adults and 500 teens from 163 congregations, the majority of those surveyed felt their congregations did not show love and concern for people in their community. Only 22% of the adults and 19% of the youth believed that their congregations demonstrated this Christian care. More believed their churches helped their own members, 36% of adults and 35% of youth, but these numbers reflect the sense that congregations are not living out the call to ‘bear one another’s burdens’ (Galatians 6:2). Dr. Peter Benson of the Search Institute reported that ‘cerebral faith in the LCMS strongly wins out over the faith of the heart... those studied were strongest in trusting and believing, weak in acting, serving, experiencing the fruits of faith’ (*Reporter*, March 1996). He says further that most survey respondents indicate that their congregations do not exhibit the characteristics that distinguish the ‘faith-enhancing congregation’ (*Reporter*, October 1995).”

The speaker concludes: “America’s secular welfare system is collapsing, religious sponsorship of institutions is declining exponentially, trust in the decisions of the political process is nearly non-existent, the fastest growing industry is crime and crime control, family life has disintegrated, and poverty and hopelessness exist in the midst of abundance. Ours is a world groaning for a uniquely Christian response that incorporates the words of Christ into tangible Christian care.”

You are one of the participants and are now in a small group in which the speaker’s presentation is to be discussed. What would you think important to bring to the discussion?

5. A Low-Income Housing Project

Several congregations in the heart of a large urban center are proposing to work together with the federal government to build and administer a system of housing aimed to encourage low-income, but self-sufficient people in the city to take on the challenges of home ownership. The congregations will not be undertaking large financial obligations, but they are proposing that the pastors of the several congregations work together with government officials to administer the program.

Many in the congregations are delighted to see the church addressing a significant social need, but some are warning that pastors ought not be distracted from their central calling of preaching the Gospel. How should we think about this proposal?

6. Serve God at the Homeless Shelter

Several members of a congregation are vocal in their criticism that the members are “too focused on themselves” and “not sufficiently committed to addressing human need.” They propose that one Sunday each month the congregation should suspend usual worship and gather instead to staff the Sunday meals program at the local homeless shelter.

How would you respond to these members’ concerns and proposal?

7. Allocating the Congregational Budget

Several influential members of a congregation have agreed together to propose that, from now on, fifty percent of the congregation’s budget should be devoted to activities that demonstrate “faith working in love.” They argue that too large a percentage of the congregation’s resources are going simply to the provision of ministry to the members. They want to see vigorous attention paid to local social concerns and to LCMS World Relief.

Others in the congregation argue that, if the congregation can afford to free up half of its financial resources, the money would be better spent on direct support of mission activities such as the theological education of indigenous pastors in developing countries and support of ministry in the military and on college campuses.

What do you think?

These seven scenarios illustrate the kinds of questions that tend to arise when Christians “reflect on the role of Christian care in the overall life of the Christian community.” At the end of this report we return to the scenarios. At this point we turn to detailed theological reflection as a basis for further discussion.

A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The 1995 CTCR report *Render Unto Caesar . . . and Unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State* alerts us to a “fundamental ambiguity in the term ‘church’” (65). We find in this observation the helpful insight that the one church can be seen from several different vantage points.

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession teaches that the church is created by the Word and sacraments. This article, therefore, describes the church as “the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel” (AC VII, 1). The church is here defined theologically according to its central and constitutive dimension. We recognize without compromise that “the *primary* concern of the church must always be the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins, for Christ’s sake, through faith alone” (*Render*, 91).

The church, thus defined, organizes itself for service in a variety of ways. Its primary focus is on Word and sacrament ministry, but the faith of the members manifests itself both in a diversity of social structures and in a diversity of daily vocations of the believers. As emphasized earlier, the question we are addressing concerns how a Christian congregation organizes to help its members express the energetic love and hope that accompany a true living faith. This requires that we reflect both on the daily lives of believers and on the variety of social structures that foster Christian service. Two related, but distinguishable, aspects of the church’s life are identified:

1. From one vantage point we can speak of a *vocational dimension* of the church’s life, the daily work of all believers. “The church, as body of Christ, involves the daily work of all believers as they engage in the many occupations that, together, constitute human communities and meet human needs. The church reaches out with the love of God for a suffering world primarily through the words and deeds of its members” (*Render*, 91).
2. From another vantage point we can speak of a *communal dimension* of the church’s life: organizing for loving service. The pri-

mary ministry of Word and sacraments inevitably involves the gathering of a community of two or more in Christ's name (Matt. 18:20). Communities brought together by Word and sacrament can also be instruments for facilitating ways that Christians express the love and hope that accompany a true living faith. In this way the church appears to the rest of the world as one more "institution of the society in which it exists" (*Render*, 92). For example, "it has a legal existence and is directly affected by a wide variety of civil legislation" (*Render*, 92). This community has always organized first for the central task of Word and sacrament ministry. Still, as organized social structures churches facilitate a wide variety of serving activities that flow from the proclamation of the Gospel. (Consider the picture of the early church provided by Acts 6 as discussed below on page 19)

Recognition of the vocational and communal dimensions of the church's life can help us better "reflect on the role of Christian care in the overall life of the Christian community."

The Vocational Dimension of the Church's Life: Daily Work of All Believers

We begin with the *vocational dimension* of the church's life. All agree that the active love and hope that accompany a true living faith will appear in the daily life and work of all believers. Lutherans are well taught by their tradition to recognize that this is the primary way the church reaches out with the love of God for a suffering world.

Lutherans understand Christian vocation or calling to indicate the places where God has located the Christian for living out his or her faith. God has placed Christians into families of origin with parents, siblings, and others. He has situated them in jobs and careers with fellow workers, employers and employees. They live in specific neighborhoods and communities with identifiable neighbors. They owe earthly obedience to particular governments. They create new families in marriage and through the procreation of children. In all of these callings Christians live out the active love that flows from living faith.

In each of these situations God has given Christians different assignments or responsibilities. For instance, the home is the place in which spouses care for each other and their children. Occupational situations are the settings for the exercise of economic responsibilities for other people.

Through government God arranges for the maintenance of human justice by punishing evildoers and by promoting the good.

When God's Word guides us to pay special attention to the humble, daily round of duties, we will not give in to the temptation to sacrifice the needs of neighbors near at hand to grand causes that appear to the world to be more worthy. When our understanding of Christian callings is rooted in Scripture, we are protected against narrow worldly definitions of what "real care" would mean. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession alerts us to the temptation to substitute human works for Scripture's account of our callings and says: "The commandments of God are obscured; for when men regard these works as perfect and spiritual, they will vastly prefer them to the works that God commands, like the tasks of one's calling, the administration of public affairs, the administration of the household, married life, and the rearing of children" (Ap XV, 25).

In our own time the Cambridge historian Edward Norman illuminates the same temptation to denigrate simple everyday works while pursuing worldly ideals of generosity. He argues that some Christian leaders are "liable to absorb seemingly any account of world conditions which exploits their generosity," and he asks "what will happen to Christianity as its content is drained away into the great pool of secular idealism."⁵

The following poem vividly captures the significance of the believer's daily work:

Lord of all pots and pans and things, since I've no time to be
A saint by doing lovely things, or watching late with Thee,
Or dreaming in the dawn-light, or storming Heaven's gates,
Make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates.
Although I must have Martha's hands, I have a Mary mind,
And when I black the boots and shoes, Thy sandals, Lord, I find.
I think of how they trod the earth, what time I scrub the floor:
Accept this meditation, Lord, I haven't time for more.
Warm all the kitchen with Thy love, and light it with Thy peace;
Forgive me all my worrying, and make my grumbling cease.
Thou who didst love to give men food, in room or by the sea,
Accept this service that I do — I do it unto Thee.⁶

The 1995 report *Render Unto Caesar* focused on how the church speaks to or influences government. Noting the crucial daily work of believers in their various callings, the report speaks of "indirect and unintentional

⁵ Edward Norman, *Christianity and the World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 18-19; 13.

⁶ Cecily Halleck, *Christian Quotation of the Day*, December 26, 1997, <http://www.gospel-com.net/cqod>.

influence” and “indirect and intentional influence” that the church might have on society through the daily work of individual Christians.⁷ We can use similar language to discuss how Christian care characterizes the Christian community through the daily life of the believers.

Indirect and Unintentional Care

When the church is engaged in its central task of proclaiming the Gospel and administering the sacraments, faith is engendered in the members and love follows—often without explicit instruction. In many cases the spontaneous—*indirect and unintended*—result is active love in the daily life of believers. The terms “indirect and unintended” indicate that love flows from faith in the Gospel apart from any specific or organized plan or “intention” on the church’s part, while at the same time suggesting that the church serves society “indirectly” by helping individuals who are in need.

Indirect and Intentional Care

As part of its proclamation, however, the church does also intentionally speak of the works that characterize the lives of believers. Our justification before God is without works by faith, but “good works should be done because God has commanded them and in order to exercise our faith, to give testimony, and to render thanks” (Ap IV, 189). The Formula of Concord advises that “it is just as necessary to exhort people to Christian discipline and good works, and to remind them how necessary it is that they exercise themselves in good works as an evidence of their faith and their gratitude toward God, as it is to warn against mingling good works in the article of justification” (FC Ep, V, 18).

Thus, when the church is engaged in its central task of proclaiming the Gospel and administering the sacraments, an *indirect yet intended* result will be the active love seen in the daily life of believers. The church will in fact instruct the believers in God’s Word “so that they will not be thrown back on their own holiness and piety and under the pretext of the Holy Spirit’s guidance set up a self-elected service of God without his Word and command, . . .” (FC SD, VI, 20).

Believers also struggle daily with the Old Adam, and the preaching of the Law alerts us to the pernicious effects of the Old Adam’s struggle against faith.

In this life Christians are not renewed perfectly and completely. For although their sins are covered up through the perfect obedience of Christ, so that they are not reckoned to believers for damna-

⁷ See pages 67-90 of the report. The report draws on work by Robert Benne in “The Church and Politics: Four Possible Connections,” *This World* 25 (Spring 1989) and in his *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

tion, and although the Holy Spirit has begun the mortification of the Old Adam and their renewal in the spirit of their minds, nevertheless the Old Adam still clings to their nature and to all its internal and external powers Hence, because of the desires of the flesh the truly believing, elect, and reborn children of God require in this life not only the daily preaching and admonition, warning and threatening of the law, but frequently the punishment of the law as well, to egg them on so that they follow the Spirit of God, . . . (FC SD, VI, 7–9).

Francis Pieper summarizes this feature of the church’s work as follows:

The Church must demand of its members that they prove the faith of the heart by good works. The Church insists on a justification by works [not before God but before men]. The further a Christian congregation departs from this practice, the more will license abound in her midst, the less will she fulfill her calling of being a light to the world and a salt of the earth. Let her never forget that Scripture calls for this justification by works. John 13:35: “By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples if ye have love one to another.”⁸

The church will not shy away from instructing the believers in the good works that characterize daily life on the basis of God’s Word. In the words of the Epistle of James, we will teach that “religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27). In this way an indirect but intended effect of the church’s work will be the shaping of the love that is shown in the daily lives of the believers.

The Central Concern of the Church

In the preceding section on “The Vocational Dimension of the Church’s Life: Daily Work of All Believers,” we examined a crucial dimension of the church’s life as regards faith active in love. This is one of the dimensions discussed in the CTCR’s 1995 report *Render Unto Caesar*.⁹ The Commission stated:

The church, as body of Christ, involves the daily work of all believers as they engage in the many occupations that, together, constitute human communities and meet human needs. The

⁸ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 2:542.

⁹ Further reflection on these matters can be found in C.F.W. Walther’s *The True Visible Church*, *The Form of a Christian Congregation*, and *Church and Ministry*.

church reaches out with the love of God for a suffering world primarily through the words and deeds of its members (*Render*, 91).

In the daily work of believers we have located the *primary* way Christian care, the active love and hope that accompany a true living faith, reaches out with the love of God for a suffering world. This way of locating Christian care in the vocations of Christians assumes that the church is “the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel” (AC VII, 1). Therefore, the central concern of the church “must always be the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins, for Christ’s sake, through faith alone” (*Render*, 91).

If an assembly of people is to be and to live as church, then its central mission must be nothing other than to preach the Gospel and administer the holy sacraments. When this mission is lost, then faith is lost; and when faith is lost, salvation is lost and with it the energetic love and hope that accompany a true living faith. Fallen children of earth can create assemblies that, to outward appearance, do great deeds of love. But when deeds of love flow from something other than faith created by the Gospel, they are, before God, sinful (Rom. 14:23). The Formula of Concord states:

[Works] which unbelievers and the unconverted are also able and required to perform, are indeed praiseworthy in the sight of the world, and even God will reward them with temporal blessings in this world, but since they do not flow from true faith, they are sinful (that is, spattered with sins in the sight of God), and God regards them as sin and as impure because of our corrupted nature and because the person is not reconciled with God. A bad tree cannot bear good fruit [Matt. 7:18], and “whatsoever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23) (FC SD, IV, 8).

The central concern of the assembly of believers is to preach the Gospel and administer the holy sacraments that faith, salvation and eternal life may abound. “In the sight of God it is really faith that makes a person holy; faith alone serves him, while our works serve the people” (LC I, 147).

Observe how biblical faith frees the Christian for service that is in no way self-serving. We serve God only by faith’s receiving the forgiveness of our sins won by Christ. Thus, nothing but Christ’s work is required to put us right with God, so “Christians are free to serve their neighbors in the countless ways which love discerns but law can never specify.”¹⁰ Christians “are free to love their neighbor without any thought for themselves or their own fulfillment of the law.”¹¹ Because we are justified by grace through

¹⁰ *Abortion in Perspective*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, as prepared by its Social Concerns Committee, May 1984, 33.

¹¹ Leif Grane, *The Augsburg Confession: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959), 87.

faith, we are free simply to see needs and meet them in loving care.

Matthew 25:31–46 is instructive in this regard. When the Son of Man comes, Jesus teaches, He [“the King”] will say to those on His right hand: “‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me’” (vv. 34–36). In order to lead us away from the self-serving notion that we should serve the poor and hurting as a way of gaining eternal merit with God, Jesus stresses the perplexity of those who served the poor and hurting: “‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?’” (vv. 37–39). The focus here is how those who are truly right with God by grace through faith serve others without any further thought of how it may serve them. So it is that one of the church’s post-communion prayers asks that God would strengthen us “in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another” (*Lutheran Worship*, 174).

The Communal Dimension of the Church’s Life: Organizing for Loving Service

We have now examined the vocational dimension as a manifestation of the church’s Christian care in the world, and we have reviewed how the church by its very nature focuses on Word and sacrament ministry as its central concern. Both of these aspects of the church’s life are discussed also in the 1995 report *Render Unto Caesar*.¹²

We turn now to the communal dimension of the church’s Christian care in the world. The CTCR’s 1995 report speaks of how the “church par-

¹² Helpful here by way of summary is Henry Hamann’s assertion that “the most significant contribution of the church to the welfare of society and the world is by way of its members, as each in his own niche in life and in accordance with his own special capabilities works for and serves his fellow-men, activity which includes also doing what is expected of conscientious citizens. The church makes part of its task the training and education of its members in just this attitude of responsibility for society. Theologically speaking, we have here faith working by love, and the church’s task of education here is its use of the Law in its role as rule and standard of a godly life.” Hamann goes on to say, with comments that are pertinent to our discussion in this section: “Part of this life of love and service of the neighbour is the collective activity of Christians through the church to do the work of the state vicariously where society is too weak, too primitive, too lacking in organization to be able to carry out its proper functions.” Henry Hamann, “The Church’s Responsibility for the World: A Study in Law and Gospel,” in *Theologia Crucis: Studies in honour of Hermann Sasse*, ed. Henry P. Hamann (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1975), 86.

ticipates as an institution of the society in which it exists” (*Render*, 92). We must now explore what this means for reflecting “on the role of Christian care in the overall life of the Christian community.” Adapting the language of the 1995 report, we will discover a place for *direct and intentional communal action* on the part of the church in faithful service.¹³

We first examine some examples from Scripture and from church history, and then we will reflect on what this means in our contemporary setting.

Christian Care in the New Testament

In Acts 6 we see the apostles guiding the church to organize itself for the Christian care of its members.

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith (Acts 6:1–7).

The apostles know they must stay focused on the church’s central concern to preach the Gospel that creates faith in the hearers. But they also show that as a social organization the church can organize to help its members effectively express the energetic love and hope that accompany a true living faith.

Perhaps the most powerful articulation in the New Testament of how the Spirit can energize the church’s Christian care is found in 2 Corinthians 8.

We want you to know, brethren, about the grace of God which has been shown in the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part. For they gave

¹³ See pages 82-90 of *Render Unto Caesar*.

according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but first they gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. Accordingly we have urged Titus that as he had already made a beginning, he should also complete among you this gracious work. Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in utterance, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in your love for us—see that you excel in this gracious work also.

I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I give my advice: it is best for you now to complete what a year ago you began not only to do but to desire, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not. I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written, “He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack.”

But thanks be to God who puts the same earnest care for you into the heart of Titus. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord. With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel; and not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us in this gracious work which we are carrying on, for the glory of the Lord and to show our good will. We intend that no one should blame us about this liberal gift which we are administering, for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of men. And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker in your service; and as for our brethren, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. So give proof, before the churches, of your love and of our boasting about you to these men (2 Cor. 8:1–24).

Here St. Paul encourages the Corinthians to participate generously in the offering that he is gathering for relief of the poor in the Jerusalem

church. The motivation for such giving is clear: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

An equality should be established within the church, though not necessarily an equality based on common ownership or equal sharing. The goal is not merely sharing but giving and receiving:

I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality (2 Cor. 8:13–14).

C. S. Lewis offers a captivating image of such giving and receiving while commenting on the Arthurian poems of Charles Williams: “The courtesy of the Emperor has absolutely decreed that no man can paddle his own canoe and every man can paddle his fellow’s”¹⁴

A life marked by giving and receiving, by countless exchanges and burdens borne—“We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear” (*Lutheran Worship*, 295)—is a life lived on the basis of the example of the great exchange by which Christ takes the sinner’s place: “He serves that I a lord may be; A great exchange indeed!” (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 105). The life of the Triune God is one of giving. From eternity the Father gives His all to the Son in the generation of the Word; from eternity the Son offers himself back to the Father, and this exchange takes place through the bond of the Spirit. We see this giving above all in that gift which is the great exchange of our sinfulness for Christ’s righteousness (Jn. 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:21).¹⁵

The life that the church as Christ’s body seeks to live and is called to live resembles this giving and exchanging that we see in Christ. A believer’s giving does not atone for sin. Our exchanging does not create new life. But in assuming the burdens of others and exchanging our comfort for their affliction, we live out a life under the cross to which Christ has called us—a life marked by giving and receiving, by the inner reciprocities of love.

¹⁴ Charles Williams, *Arthurian Torso: Containing the Posthumous Figure of Arthur* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 123.

¹⁵ In his “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper” (1528), Martin Luther writes: “The Father gives himself to us, with heaven and earth and all the creatures, in order that they may serve us and benefit us . . . the Son himself subsequently gave himself and bestowed all his works, sufferings, wisdom, and righteousness, and reconciled us to the Father, in order that restored to life and righteousness, we might also know and have the Father and his gifts . . . the Holy Spirit comes and gives himself to us also, wholly and completely” (*LW* 37:366). For the idea of the “great exchange,” see Luther’s *Lectures on Galatians* 1535, where he comments on Gal. 3:13: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become for us a curse” (*LW* 26:276ff).

Christian Care in Church History

The church's organization for Christian care is clearly witnessed in a scene from the life of the early Church: the martyrdom of St. Laurence at Rome in the third century. The Christian congregation at Rome had appointed seven deacons, among whom Laurence was chief. Hearing rumors that the church was receiving generous offerings, the pagan prefect ordered Laurence, chief custodian of these offerings, to produce "the treasures of the church." Laurence promised to have them gathered in three days, and when the prefect arrived to confiscate the wealth, Laurence said, "Behold the treasures of the church"—pointing to the poor, the sick, the widows and orphans whom he had assembled and who were supported from the offerings of the congregation. Enraged, the prefect ordered Laurence's execution.

The story is powerful, but the circumstances were not unusual. Historian Paul Johnson has written that Christians in the first centuries "ran a miniature welfare state in an empire which for the most part lacked social services."¹⁶ The early church was not a state but a community within the state which carried out certain functions of human care that today are often discharged by politically established and supervised institutions.¹⁷

Their charity was not limited to fellow members of Christ's body. When the apostate Emperor Julian sought to revive paganism in the fourth century, he ordered the imperial clergy to organize and administer charitable funds for relief of the poor, in imitation of the Christians. "The impious Galileans," he noted, "support not only their own poor, but ours as well."¹⁸

This necessity of the church's life did not go unnoticed at the time of the Reformation. The Reformers often criticized the extensive practice of begging and almsgiving that had grown up in previous centuries. But the other side of their criticism was a call for more organized and communally structured ways of caring for the poor. Not personal deeds of love alone, but structured works of care were necessary.

¹⁶ Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Atheneum, 1980), 75.

¹⁷ A good example of the social service of the early church is the monastic practice influenced by Basil of Caesarea. Adopting the communal ideals of Pachomius, Basil commonly constructed near his monastic houses shelters for the sojourner, hospitals for the sick, and hostels for the needy. See Epistle 94 where Basil mentions the places for the care of "strangers, both for those who are on a journey and for those who require medical treatment on account of sickness . . ." *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, reprint edition, June 1995), 8:180. Francis Young writes: "All things were to be held in common and to be used for the benefit of the sick and the needy. The monastery was to be situated within reach of suffering humanity, and provide a hospital and schools. The monk was to engage in manual work for the maintenance of the community and its welfare services." *From Nicaea to Chalcedon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

¹⁸ Paul Johnson, *History*, 75.

Thus, commenting on the statement in Deuteronomy that no beggar or starving person should be found in Israel, Luther writes: “Now since God gave this commandment in the Old Testament, how much more ought we Christians to be bound, not only to allow no one to starve or beg, but beyond that also to . . . be prepared to let everything go that anyone would take from us by force.” Moreover, he continues, Christians fail to extend their care as far as they ought when they refuse “to extend this giving to enemies or opponents. It comes hard to our false nature to do good to them who have done evil to us. But there is no getting around it, the commandment has reference to all men, ‘Give to him who begs from you.’”¹⁹

Luther encouraged parishes (which at the time were communities both civil and religious in character) to establish a “common chest” from which help could be given to those in need. The “Fraternal Agreement on the Common Chest of the Entire Assembly at Leisnig,” for which Luther offered advice and to which he added a preface of his own, provided, for example, care to the aged and the infirm. Luther writes:

Those individuals in our parish and assembly who are impoverished by force of circumstances and left without assistance by their relatives, if they have any capable of helping, and those who are unable to work because of illness or old age and are so poor as to suffer real need, shall receive each week on Sunday, and at other times as occasion demands, maintenance and support from our common chest through the ten directors. This is to be done out of Christian love, to the honor and praise of God, so that their lives and health may be preserved from further deterioration, enfeeblement, and foreshortening through lack of shelter, clothing, nourishment, and care, and so that no impoverished person in our assembly need ever publicly cry out, lament, or beg for such items of daily necessity. For this reason the ten directors shall constantly make diligent inquiry and investigation in order to have complete and reliable knowledge of all those poor—as above—in the city and villages within our entire parish, and they shall confer on this matter every Sunday. The names of the poor whom they have discovered and decided to help, together with the action taken, shall be legibly entered in the minutes so that the resources of our common chest are distributed in orderly fashion.²⁰

Nor was this the only care authorized. From this common chest the directors were to provide for the support of the pastor, for schools, for orphans (even for their schooling), for unemployed artisans, and (through

¹⁹ “Trade and Usury” (1524), *LW* 45:281-82.

²⁰ “Fraternal Agreement on the Common Chest of the Entire Assembly at Leisnig” (1523), *LW* 45:189.

loans and gifts) for newcomers to the parish. That such an ambitious plan should have failed in the execution is not surprising, but it gives some sense of the scope of the church's Christian care which the Reformers envisioned.

Care for Persons Both Within and Outside of the Church

As noted at the beginning of this study, the church as a social institution *has* in a variety of ways organized to facilitate energetic expression of Christian care. The examples from the New Testament show the church organizing to care for fellow members. The instances cited from church history show the church organizing both to care for fellow members and to care for persons outside the church. These examples remind us of Gal. 6:10: "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." We are also again reminded of James 1:27: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

Some theologians within the LCMS recently published a collection of essays titled *A Cup of Cold Water: A Look at Biblical Charity*. It is noted in these essays that the New Testament rarely, if ever, makes persons outside the community of faith the objects of charitable work. In the essay "Considering Biblical Charity within a Creedal Framework," Charles Arand asks "whether or not the church as a community of believers ought to help in relieving the bodily needs and wants of those outside its membership, and if so, to what extent?"²¹ The discussion in Dr. Arand's essay helps us with this question. He states, for example, "To say that social concerns are not the mission of the church does not mean that the church should take no interest in the needs of the wider society. Nor does it mean that the church is forbidden or prevented from doing something to alleviate those needs."²²

We recall here what is said above in the section on "Daily Work of the Believers." The First Article of the Apostles' Creed teaches us that God has called all to the tasks of their situations in the created world. Christians will apply themselves to their tasks with the active love that is born of faith. This is the *primary* way the church cares for both the Christian and the non-Christian neighbor. We have said that this is an *indirect* form of care, only because the assembly of believers does not directly organize itself for the provision of such care.

In his essay Dr. Arand points out, however, that we experience emergencies "when the orders and agencies of the First Article have abdicated

²¹ Robert Rosin and Charles P. Arand, eds., *A Cup of Cold Water: A Look at Biblical Charity* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Publications, 1996), 165.

²² *Ibid.*, 195.

or abandoned their responsibility or where the established orders have simply broken down or are non-existent.” Examples that he cites include “the case of large scale disasters like typhoons, famines, and earthquakes or smaller scale crises where the infrastructure has broken down such as in the inner city.” In the face of such emergencies the church will often “step in to relieve suffering and need.”²³

This approach reminds the church not to overrule or minimize the daily work of believers and yet to be alert to the inevitable emergencies that confront us in a sinful world. A harder question is “When does an emergency or crisis situation become a regular, ongoing feature of the church’s work?”²⁴

The picture is further complicated by a remarkable feature of modern social and political life in a democracy. Many functions that in a past time were considered the sole province of the government appear to be better managed by non-governmental structures that mediate between individuals and governmental power. Many in America are convinced that mediating structures such as labor unions, corporations, managed care organizations, and private social and service agencies are better and more efficiently able to provide a variety of essential social services. Some also argue that individuals are better protected from oppressive governmental power, even “benevolent” power, when they are able to work in and with mediating structures rather than simply with the government. *Render Unto Caesar* approvingly quotes Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus: “*Mediating structures are essential for a vital democratic society. . . . Public policy should protect and foster mediating structures*” and “*Wherever possible, public policy should utilize mediating structures for the realization of social purposes*” (67).

When we recognize that the church in its communal dimension can act as a mediating structure in society, the question about what might “become a regular, ongoing feature of the church’s work” can go beyond the question of simply stepping in when there are emergencies. Energetic Christian care for neighbors can express itself through careful church organization that takes seriously the need for mediating structures in contemporary society. We might, for example, suppose that congregations establish day care centers not simply because other structures in society are failing to meet this need. Some Christians would argue that a mediating social institution like a local church will provide needed care for children that is superior to what might be provided by a government-sponsored day care program. And this can be accomplished while proper attention continues to be given to the central priority of the Word and sacrament ministry of the congregation. Similar arguments are offered today also in

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

support of church-supported elementary and high schools, and of church-supported health initiatives for the poor both within and outside the church.

This leads to considerations of the ebb and flow of the ways in which the church as social institution organizes itself for human care.

ORGANIZING FOR CHRISTIAN CARE

The Need for Flexibility

History shows great variety in the way the church organizes for Christian care, a variety that depends in part on the social circumstances in which the church is working. Those gathered together to bring God's Word to both believers and unbelievers will participate together also in works of mutual care and love toward those outside the church. In restoring our relationship to God, God's Word frees us for energetic Christian care. Much Christian care is lived out in the believers' daily work, but some forms of care are more effectively carried out as Christians work together with other Christians. Working together seems especially necessary when distortion or corruption in the established orders of creation make it difficult for Christians to act individually to provide human care.

Christians can also organize to work together with Christians in other traditions and with non-Christians in caring institutions of society. To be sure, Christians most happily and comfortably cooperate with those who share their confession. But just as individual Christians cooperate in and with the social structures where God has placed them, so Christians organized in specific social structures can also cooperate in and with other social and governmental structures for the care of neighbors in need. Again, churches are likely to cooperate especially in the voluntary and special social structures that spring up in response to needs not met by currently established structures in society.

Such cooperation with others, either as individuals or in various social structures, need not compromise the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Cooperative endeavors of this kind, when they do not compromise the proclamation of God's Word, can be simply the living out of love that springs from a living faith. However, when other individuals or communities advocate policies and programs that are contrary to the guidance given in the Scriptures, great care should be taken by Christians not to cooperate in ways that compromise the proclamation of God's Word.²⁵

²⁵ Cooperation with others in ways that would compromise what the Scriptures teach regarding abortion, for example, could not be done without also compromising the church's confession and proclamation of God's Word. *Render Unto Caesar* notes that the Synod has "concluded that the question of abortion is addressed so clearly by Scripture, that it is such an extraordinary social problem, and that this problem is so fundamentally tied up with what Scripture says about the God-given duty of the state, that failure to speak and under certain circumstances to act would be tantamount to the failure of the German church under Hitler" (87).

Loving care in harmony with God's Word can draw people into contact with the Gospel. Peter reminds us to "always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). The conduct both of our individual lives and of our life together in the church can cause unbelievers to ask for an account of our hope.

There is no single way in which the church must organize to assist its members in showing human care. Accordingly, there is no prescribed manner in which the church must organize today. The structures employed for the work of human care thus differ from the office of the pastoral ministry, which is divinely instituted for the proclamation of the Gospel in the public teaching of the church.

In this light it would be quite appropriate and perhaps wise if the church today were to encourage the development of religious "orders" devoted to Christian care. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession speaks of "non-obligatory forms of discipline" that some saints undertake "to have more leisure for teaching and other pious duties" (XXVII, 21). 1 Corinthians 7:32–40 provides food for thought on how some Christians may be called sooner or later to devote themselves to "the affairs of the Lord" in ways different from the usual and ordinary callings in the world (see also 1 Tim. 5:9–16). Programs like those organized under the name "Stephen Ministries" are a good example of an order devoted to service in today's church.

Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession notes that sometimes the person who is the pastor will also have responsibilities in addition to those that belong to the pastoral office. "Whatever other power and jurisdiction bishops may have in various matters (for example, in matrimonial cases and in tithes), they have these by virtue of human right" (AC XXVIII, 29). While those called by the church to serve in the pastoral office concern themselves with the church's central task of preaching the Gospel and administering the holy sacraments, they also often have additional callings. A pastor is often also a husband and father. Senior pastors in large congregations have complex administrative duties to attend to in addition to their pastoral tasks. Some pastors are "worker priests" earning a living in a secular calling while also serving as pastors. It may happen that in some congregations the organization of particular initiatives in Christian care may be administered by the person who is also a pastor. In such cases the administration of a program of Christian care will not be seen to be a distinctive function of the pastoral office but rather an additional task in the church's life that this person happens also to oversee. Luther's comments on Gal. 2:10 are appropriate here: "Only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do." Commenting on this verse, Luther writes: "Next to the proclamation of the Gospel it is the

task of a good pastor to be mindful of the poor. For wherever the church is, there must be poor people.”²⁶

The work of human care can be done in the local congregation. But it can also be carried out through larger administrative structures overseeing and coordinating the work of many congregations. Today in our Synod associations of congregations, circuits, Districts, and synodical offices all help with organizing for Christian care. There is a place for *direct and intentional action* on the part of the church as a social institution.²⁷

The Term “Social Ministry”

Today it is commonplace to label the church’s organized Christian care “social ministry.” This is to emphasize that Christian care is a part of the church’s ministry and to speak of one ministry that includes both proclamation of the Gospel and works of love which result from it. Such language may for some, however, obscure the distinction between the one divinely established office of Word and sacrament ministry and other offices of service in the church. For others the term may wrongly suggest a detached ministry separate from but equivalent to the office of Word and sacrament ministry. Talk of “social ministry,” however, rightly suggests the church’s concern not only for individual or personal deeds of love but also for organized Christian responses to human need.

In this report we have avoided the language of “social ministry” and, in light of the LCMS terminology (e.g., “Board for Human Care Ministries”), have spoken simply of the church’s communal Christian care. We all seek to avoid the cultural captivity that has beset so many Christian denominations in our time and place. This cultural captivity easily distracts congregations and church bodies from their central task of preaching the Gospel. Furthermore, when under the name of “social ministry” political and economic ideologies are used to judge the integrity of Christians, the body of Christ is thereby wrongly judged and divided. In the name of “social ministry” the energies and resources of some church bodies have been increasingly focused on political agendas, while the life of the church is impoverished and malnourished. Church bodies too often begin to sound as if the Jesus whom they worship were primarily a new lawgiver.

Against all such cultural Christianity we affirm the following: the church lives and is nourished by the Gospel of Christ alone; it is first and foremost an assembly of believers gathered under the cross around the

²⁶ “Lectures on Galatians” (1535), *LW* 26:105.

²⁷ The LCMS’ Board for Human Care Ministries oversees LCMS participation in supporting a wide variety of organized human care efforts and activities, often done in cooperation with other entities and agencies.

Word and sacraments that create faith and sustain their common life; it calls all people to share in that common life within the body of Christ; nothing must be allowed to dislodge the Gospel which makes Christ present from its central place in the church's mission.

But faith created by the Gospel is active in love, and love in turn seeks to respond to human need. Recognizing this, the church in its communal dimension in society cannot ignore—and indeed has not ignored—opportunities to organize for Christian care. Christian care that serves neighbors in need—both the brother or sister within the Christian community and the stranger, or even the enemy whom we are called to love and serve—is inevitably present in the common life of Christ's body.

The forms and structures through which the church carries out its human care will vary from time to time and place to place, but the task itself is imperative, not optional. Not all Christians will devote themselves to this work in equal measure, but the church as Christ's body will seek ways and means to relieve the poor and others in need. Among the several gifts that the Spirit gives to the body will be those needed for the church's work of human care. "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness" (Rom. 12:6–8). This service begins first within the body of Christ, but it naturally extends to others who are in want. "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). There is a place for *direct and intentional action* by the church in organizing for Christian care. It is also true that the specific tasks that are included within the church's organized Christian care will vary from place to place. Where others—for example, through governmental structures or other mediating structures—provide service, the church may wisely preserve its resources.

There is always some danger in emphasizing strongly the church's organized programs of Christian care, especially when one considers the enormous scope of human need in our world. The life of the church may be so overwhelmed by its efforts to organize and offer care that the proclamation of the Gospel by which the church lives and is nourished loses its centrality. Against such danger there is no protection other than self-conscious attention to the ministry of Word and sacraments. Yet the possibility of abuse must not be used to deny the place for direct and intentional action by the church in organizing for Christian care. Faith must be active in love, and we may be confident that the Spirit will bestow the needed gifts upon the church.

CONCLUSION

Our task in this report has been to “reflect on the role of Christian care in the overall life of the Christian community.” Detailed reflections have been provided concerning the daily work of all believers, the central concern of the church, and the church in its communal dimension in society. These reflections provide a basis for thinking about the contrasting lines of thought concerning organized Christian care in the congregation and for discussing scenarios such as the ones sketched in the beginning of this document.

The Contrasting Lines of Thought: Response and Summary

1. One line of thought argues that the church should much more systematically organize itself for the provision of Christian care. This thinking urges
 - a. that Christians be much more systematically instructed in how to show Christian care as individuals, and
 - b. that the corporate life of congregations, Districts, and the Synod be more energetically organized to provide Christian care.

Response: This line of thought rightly reminds us that the church’s full proclamation includes systematic instruction concerning how Christians live out their faith in their various callings. This approach also takes into account how often the church in its communal dimension in society has opportunities to assist its members in organized expression of Christian care. On the other hand, proponents of this thinking sometimes impose on the church non-biblical standards for measuring whether individuals are being faithful in their various callings. And they sometimes give the impression that their account of how the church might organize for Christian care captures what every Christian community ought to be doing. They fail to recognize the wide diversity possible in the ways Christians individually and corporately express faith active in love. In extreme forms,

not usually found within the LCMS, this line of thought stridently promotes political and economic ideologies rather than faith active in love.

2. The other line of thought argues that the church acting corporately has no specific mandate and often lacks the competence to organize for the provision of Christian care. This thinking suggests
 - a. that the Christian care lived out by Christian individuals in their diverse callings in home, career, and community, is often minimized or overlooked by people who criticize the church for failing to instruct its members in Christian care, and
 - b. that pastors—called to proclaim the Gospel and administer the sacraments—and other church leaders have not been summoned by God also to organize institutional efforts to address social concerns. Indeed, even if pastors have wisdom for such efforts, they owe to their calling devotion “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

Response: This line of thought rightly reminds us that the central work of the church is to gather people around the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Without this work, the church simply does not exist. Proponents of this thinking also remind us that the pastoral office exists for Word and sacrament ministry. This approach further urges us not to underestimate or miscalculate the love lived out by believers in their daily work. On the other hand, proponents of this line of thought seem not to give sufficient attention to the reality of the church understood as it appears in its communal dimension in society, a social organization of God’s temporal rule. They do not recognize the special opportunities the church has, in its communal dimension, to organize and coordinate Christian care both in emergency situations and as a community organizing for service in society.

Summary:

1. The central concern of the church will be to proclaim the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins and to administer the sacraments.
2. The primary expression of energetic Christian care will continue to be through the faithful daily life of believers.
3. There is a place for the church, in its communal dimension in society, to help its members organize for expression of the active love that issues from a living faith. The ways in which specific Christian communities organize for caring service will vary greatly from time to time and place to place.

Discussion of the Scenarios

In the light of these conclusions, pastors and members of our congregations can discuss the scenarios at the beginning of this report, as well as real-life issues, in scriptural and thoughtful ways. The scenarios are repeated here and brief notes are added to help facilitate reflection and discussion.

1. A Parish Nurse Program

A group of congregations is deliberating whether to make funds available to hire a full-time registered nurse to implement health-related programs in the congregations. The proposed plan is that this person would do the following: keep tabs on members of the congregations whose health needs are perhaps not being met in a satisfactory way; conduct wellness classes for interested members; help members interact effectively with their physicians and hospitals; and in a limited way, make available some basic health care to people in need who live in range of the participating congregations.

Some persons in the congregations welcome this proposal as a sign that the church will finally be living the Gospel in a concrete and visible way. Others are critical of the proposal because they fear that it will obscure the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They also assert that the money involved would be better spent to support missionary proclamation, either locally or in a part of the world little touched by the Christian Gospel.

How should we think about these reactions to this proposal?

Notes: Pages 22–24 of the report address this question directly. Congregations often face significant questions concerning how best to employ the resources of time, talent and money provided by the members. What considerations might help a congregation work out satisfactory divisions between resources devoted to missionary work and resources devoted to human care initiatives such as a parish nurse program? The paragraphs on page 6 about “nonbiblical soul/body dualism” may help us see why no easy playing off of the two concerns is possible. Page 26 also reminds us of the missionary opportunities sometimes created by programs of energetic love.

2. A Day Care Center Program

A medium-sized congregation is considering whether to establish and staff a day care center for preschool children. Many families both inside and outside the congregation need day care. Members are suggesting that the proposed center would meet a genuine human need, put children in a

better environment than might be found in some secular centers, and provide a way that unbelievers would become better acquainted with the Christian community.

Many in the congregation are enthusiastic about the plan, but some are worried that people might become confused about the essentials of the Christian mission.

What do you think? How is this proposal similar to or different from a proposal to establish a Lutheran elementary or high school?

Notes: Pages 24–26 of the report address this question directly. If a congregation decides to proceed with this plan or with plans for an elementary school or high school, how might the concern not to mislead people about the Gospel and the relationship of faith and works be addressed?

3. A Food Pantry

A small congregation maintains a food pantry for people unable to secure sufficient resources for their own or their families' meals. Since the pastor is the only person present at the church on a regular basis, he is the primary contact person for people bringing food and for those who volunteer to staff the pantry at designated hours. He also usually receives food pantry inquiries outside the designated hours. Since most members of the congregation work full-time, getting sufficient volunteers for the program is an ongoing challenge.

For the most part the congregation is glad to sponsor this program, but some complain that it takes too much of the pastor's time away from his other tasks.

You have been asked to meet with the congregation and the pastor to discuss the project. What will you bring to the discussion?

Notes: This scenario provides an occasion to discuss the challenging questions raised as we seek to relate the church's central task of Word and sacrament ministry to other necessary tasks. Are people worried that Word and sacrament ministry is being neglected or perhaps that other necessary community-building tasks of the pastor are being slighted? Pages 28–29 briefly examine the multiple roles of pastors in contemporary church life.

4. Faith and Works

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has brought together persons committed to human care ministries from all of its Districts. At the meeting one presenter offers some comments in light of James 2:17—"So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

The speaker reports: “A year-long study conducted by Search Institute on ‘Congregations at Crossroads: A National study of Adults and Youth in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’ concluded that our church ‘needs to increase its efforts to help members make the connection between the church’s teachings and the way Lutherans live out their daily lives’ (Reporter, October 1995). Out of approximately 1800 adults and 500 teens from 163 congregations, the majority of those surveyed felt their congregations did not show love and concern for people in their community. Only 22% of the adults and 19% of the youth believed that their congregations demonstrated this Christian care. More believed their churches helped their own members, 36% of adults and 35% of youth, but these numbers reflect the sense that congregations are not living out the call to ‘bear one another’s burdens’ (Galatians 6:2). Dr. Peter Benson of the Search Institute, reported that ‘cerebral faith in the LCMS strongly wins out over the faith of the heart . . . those studied were strongest in trusting and believing, weak in acting, serving, experiencing the fruits of faith’ (Reporter, March 1996). He says further that most survey respondents indicate that their congregations do not exhibit the characteristics that distinguish the ‘faith-enhancing congregation’ (Reporter, October 1995).

The speaker concludes: “America’s secular welfare system is collapsing, religious sponsorship of institutions is declining exponentially, trust in the decisions of the political process is nearly non-existent, the fastest growing industry is crime and crime control, family life has disintegrated, and poverty and hopelessness exist in the midst of abundance. Ours is a world groaning for a uniquely Christian response that incorporates the words of Christ into tangible Christian care.”

You are one of the participants and are now in a small group in which the speaker’s presentation is to be discussed. What would you think important to bring to the discussion?

Notes: The section titled “A Theological Framework” on pages 12–26 of the report addresses some of the issues here. Important questions to ask would be this: How far do the survey results reflect a lack of love on the part of LCMS members? How far do they reflect an underestimation in the survey and/or in the minds of those surveyed of the significance of the daily work of Christian believers?

5. A Low-Income Housing Project

Several congregations in the heart of a large urban center are proposing to work together with the federal government to build and administer a system of housing aimed to encourage poor, but self-sufficient people in the city to take on the challenges of home ownership. The congregations will not be undertaking large financial obligations, but they are proposing

that the pastors of the several congregations work together with government officials to administer the program.

Many in the congregations are delighted to see the church addressing a significant social need, but some are warning that pastors ought not be distracted from their central calling of preaching the Gospel.

How should we think about this proposal?

Notes: The specific question about pastors engaging in this kind of work is taken up on pages 28 and 29. If the plan were put into effect, what steps might the congregations take to help themselves and their pastors make sure that the pastoral office of Word and sacrament ministry is not dislodged from its central place?

6. *Serve God at the Homeless Shelter*

Several members of a congregation are vocal in their criticism that the members are “too focused on themselves” and “not sufficiently committed to addressing human need.” They propose that one Sunday each month the congregation should suspend usual worship and gather instead to staff the Sunday meals program at the local homeless shelter.

How would you respond to these members’ concerns and proposal?

Notes: Pages 16–18 of the report caution us that the central concern for Word and sacrament ministry would be neglected by a proposal to suspend worship. What other ways might there be for the people proposing this activity to help the congregation reflect vigorously on addressing human need? How could the discussion of the daily work of believers on pages 13–16 perhaps put these members’ concerns in a more helpful light?

7. *Allocating the Congregational Budget*

Several influential members of a congregation have agreed together to propose that, from now on, fifty percent of the congregation’s budget should be devoted to activities that demonstrate “faith active in love.” They argue that too large a percentage of the congregation’s resources are going simply to the provision of ministry to the members. They want to see vigorous attention paid to local social concerns and to LCMS World Relief.

Others in the congregation argue that, if the congregation can afford to free up half of its financial resources, the money would be better spent on direct support of mission activities such as the theological education of indigenous pastors in developing countries and support of ministry in the military and on college campuses.

What do you think?

Notes: This scenario raises more generally the question posed by the parish nurse proposal. Congregations often face significant questions concerning how best to employ the resources of time, talent and money provided by the members. Pages 27–30 of the report affirm that there will be flexibility and diversity in how the church addresses human care needs. This scenario provides another opportunity to explore considerations that might help Christians satisfactorily divide between resources devoted to missionary work and resources devoted to human care initiatives. As in scenario two, we want to be careful not to make the distinction between verbal mission and human care serve a non-biblical dualistic way of thought.

A Concluding Prayer

Stir up, O Merciful Father, your people to true brotherly affection that we may gladly do good and serve our neighbor, as did your servant Saint Lawrence when he emptied the treasury of the church to help the poor, through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son. Amen!