

# Mercy and the Lutheran Congregation

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A translation of the essay “Intentional Care  
of the Poor and the Sick Is Essential for the  
Well-being of a Christian Congregation”

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By Theodore Julius Brohm

*Translated in English by Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison*



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Th. Brohm, "Dass eine geordnete Armen-und Kranken-pflege zum Wohlstand einer christlichen Gemeinde gehoere." *Der Lutheraner* 17, no. 23, C.F.W. Walther, ed. (June 25, 1861): 180-182.

## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

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Rev. Theodore Julius Brohm (Sept. 12 1808 – Sept. 24 1881) was born in Oberwinkel near Wittenberg in Saxony. He, like Walther, studied in Leipzig, 1827-32. Brohm was very close to Martin Stephan, becoming his personal secretary through the immigration of the early Saxons to Perry County, Missouri. He was co-founder of Concordia College in Altenburg, which was later moved to St. Louis and became Concordia Seminary. He served the school until 1843, when he accepted a call to Trinity Lutheran in New York, which he served until 1858. From 1858 to 1878 he served Holy Cross in St. Louis and finished his earthly work by serving at the Teacher's Seminary in Addison, Illinois (later Concordia, River Forest). Brohm was also very close to C.F.W. Walther, and served as LCMS vice president for fifteen years, over three periods between 1851 and 1874.

I have translated this little paper by Brohm for several reasons. First, it demonstrates clearly that in the early life of the Missouri Synod there is a definite theology for the church's corporate diakonic life of care for the needy. Second, it demonstrates that Dr. Walther himself heartily approved this theology, having published this paper in the pages of the *Lutheraner*, of which he was founder and editor. Third, this essay echoes the very drum beat of LCMS World Relief and Human Care [LCMS Disaster Response today], that the church's corporate life of mercy is no matter of indifference, but a matter of fidelity to Christ and His Gospel. Consider this stunning passage: "If the preaching of Christ has occurred within that community with power, if it has begun to grow deep roots, it will also be the case within the community as a whole that this love more and more will come into evidence. Works of love will no longer be those of individual

members of the community; rather the community as a whole will take part in them.” Brohm’s advice—that congregations take pains to order their life of care for the needy—is a message as urgent today as it was in 1861, when the Synod had only 69 congregations. And may I suggest that the lack of growth in the LCMS may have much to do with another stunning assertion Brohm makes, which also serves to smash a smug stereotype so often nursed against the founders of the Synod: “Do we let our love also flow to strangers who are poor, but who do not belong to our congregation, as did the above mentioned community at Carthage?”

As with all of this translator’s work, he is more diligent than capable. Nevertheless, we pray the following little gem rescued from Missouriiana obscurity will be a blessing for the sake of Christ and His needy ones.

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Lent I, 2006

## MERCY AND THE LUTHERAN CONGREGATION

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Intentional care of the poor and the sick is essential for the well-being of a Christian congregation. What a lovely and moving picture St. Luke paints of the faith and love of the first Christian community in Jerusalem! “They remained constant in the apostles’ teaching and in the fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayer. But all who had become believers were together and held all things in common. They sold their goods and possessions and divided them among all according to need. The multitude of the believers was of one mind and spirit. And none said of his possessions that they were his, rather they belonged to all in common. And there was no one among them in need. For as many as had land or houses sold them and brought the money and laid it at the feet of the apostles and each was given what he needed” (ACTS 2:42-45; 4:34-35).

What an astounding change had taken place among these people. Just a few days and weeks previous they were blasphemers and murderers of the Lord, standing with the crowd and shouting: Away with him! Crucify him! They had been proud, quarrelsome, envious, undisciplined men, slaves to all kinds of sinful lust. But the preaching of the Gospel, by the working of the Holy Spirit upon their hearts, had made of them believing disciples and worshippers of the Lord Jesus. They were humble, chaste, full of love, and henceforth gave all their possessions in order to serve their poor brethren. What a powerful, living, life-changing, blessed word must the Gospel be, that it brought about such a powerful, blessed turn of events! Indeed, it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe it [ROM. 1:16-17].

This sharing of possessions was indeed an entirely unique and extraordinary appearance in the life of the Jerusalem Christians. It was neither mandated nor recommended by the apostles. Nor

was it precisely imitated by other Christian communities, such as Antioch, Corinth, or Thessalonica. It was nothing less than a precious good work of self-sacrificing, self-denying love for the poor by those who had means. In this sense it is a bright shining example of the mother for all her daughters throughout the world. Even if this particular form of love was not prescriptive of precisely how other Christian communities would exercise love, the significant thing is the very love expressed in a way that had such impact. There is, in fact, a sharing of possessions, which for all Christians every place at every time is not merely suggested, but is mandated. It is an inevitable fruit of the faith and an essential mark of the Christian life. This is the sharing of possessions of which the prophet speaks: “Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?” (Is. 58:7). Or as John the Baptizer commanded: “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise” (LUKE 3:11). Or of which Christ said: “Give to everyone who begs from you” (LUKE 6:30). The sharing of possessions in Jerusalem was a temporary appearance of that sharing of possessions which remains for all times, namely love. What it possesses as its own it does not use for its own honor and comfort. It is rather concerned to make use of it for the alleviation and reduction of the need of the neighbor. As soon as the Gospel is effective in the heart of a man, where faith and love are planted in the heart by the Gospel, there a man does not say: “This land, this house, this business, this property is mine and I’ll do with it as I please.” He says rather, “This all belongs to God and my neighbor. I am only the guardian and steward of my possessions. My Lord has given me way too much to use. I am like an official given pay which exceeds his needs and those of his family. The proper and necessary use of my possessions is for my neighbor whom God places before me in his stead: the poor, the widow and the orphan, the persecuted, the sick, the churches and

schools. This sharing of possessions, which is certainly not given us as a matter of personal discretion, is expressly mandated by God, but does not demand from us a surrender of our ownership of things. It does not demand a monkish or fanatical oath of perpetual poverty, nor some sort of renunciation of the use of our possessions which are entrusted to each of us. Nor does it present to us a specific tax, like the O.T. tithe that was placed upon the people of Israel. It is completely free, bound to no law, but only to love. Still, I must assert that the law of love is by no means fulfilled through sharing a spare scrap from the excess of wealth, which a person feels in his money bag as little as a bucket of water taken from the ocean. On the contrary, love will have sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice.

If the sharing of possessions as I have described it were in full sway, it would happen that all the difference between the rich and the poor — the disparity between them — would be something other than it now is in the world. There would scarcely be millionaires who year after year pile up money with no end, and just as few poor people plagued by the pangs of hunger. Without this sharing of possessions the rich man would fatten himself from the sweat of his debtors. Without this canal of generosity his purse and money chest would swell and he would smother in his own fat. The wealth of the middle class would not be sucked dry by the taking of interest by the rich, and the kind hand of the rich would happily grant and give to those without means, and the poor, what their need requires.

Now what Christ applies to every individual, true faith's fruit and proof — namely love, active, self-sacrificing, self-denying love — also applies to an entire community of Christians. If the preaching of Christ has occurred with power within that community, if it has begun to grow deep roots, it will also be the case within the community as a whole that this love more and more will come into evidence. Works of love will no longer be



those of individual members of the community; rather the community as a whole will take part in them.

So that love will ever have opportunity to demonstrate itself and act, God according to his marvelous wisdom has mixed together rich and poor in the world. And so it happens, not by accident, that in Christian communities there are always the poor, widows, orphans and the ill. It is true, these needy ones appear to a congregation to be a great burden, and indeed are often viewed and treated as a burden. In truth however, they are no burden, but much rather a gift. They are a field in which a congregation can prepare a bountiful harvest. Indeed, it is in the form of the poor, the widows, the orphans and the sick that Christ clothes Himself. He approaches the community in order to be fed, clothed, and cared for, and He does this so that He might place upon that community on the last day a glorious crown. Oh! If only a Christian community would recognize this, it would not complain about the number of its poor and sick. That community would thank Christ that He has considered it worthy for Him to dwell within its friendly protection in the form of the poor.

How praiseworthy and lovely is what we know of the charitable-ness of the first Christians. They were not satisfied that their own poor did not suffer want, they also assisted other congregations. For instance, at the time of Caesar Claudius there was a great inflation of prices throughout the world, and it was decided by the disciples at Antioch that each, as much as he could, would send an offering to the brothers who were in Judea. They in fact did so, and sent it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul (**ACTS 11:28-30**). Paul boasted of the community in Macedonia. “For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints” (**2 COR. 8:3-4**). And through the example of the community in Macedonia the communities of believers in Achaia were also stirred up to take part in the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem (**ROM. 15:26**).

The fire of love did not dwindle in post-apostolic times either. With great fidelity each community tended to its poor, sick and imprisoned. Each Sunday, after the divine service, every member willingly brought generous contributions from which the needs of those suffering were met, and moreover, individuals took pains to provide assistance as needed. It was particularly the business of the Christian housewife to look after the protection of the poor and sick. The love of the first Christians was not limited to the narrow circle of their neighboring vicinity. When other Christian communities needed assistance, they hastened to gather funds and the proceeds were always generous. They also demonstrated their love to non-Christians. At Carthage in Africa a terrible plague broke out which daily claimed countless people. The non-Christians were overwhelmed by the numbers, and in their dismay they neglected to bury the dead. Cyprian, the bishop of the community of believers at Carthage, a man full of burning love for his Lord (he himself suffered martyrdom in 258), bid his parish come together, and he lectured them on mercy. He demonstrated to his people that if they did no more than the non-Christians and tax collectors, who only took care of their own, they were not worthy of the name Christian. For it was their duty also to love their enemies. And Cyprian did not speak in vain. A holy zeal of love was enflamed within all of them. The Christians divided themselves into groups in order to render effective assistance in the emergency. The wealthy gave generously. The poor gave what they had, namely the work of their hands. The non-Christians who were ill who had been abandoned by their own, found comfort and consolation. Bodies were buried. Streets were cleaned. No one considered the danger in which he placed his life, and the non-Christians looked on in amazement at the effects of the love of God in Christ. They also had a salutary opportunity to compare these works of love with their own selfishness and lack of humanity.

The horrors of the plague were followed by the terrors of war. The province of Numidia, near Carthage, was laid waste by an unexpected invasion of barbarians. Among others, many Christians were taken captive. Eight Numidian bishops communicated the horrendous circumstances to Bishop Cyprian. What he felt and did in response is demonstrated best by his own answer. “With deep sorrow,” he wrote, “and with tears, dear brothers, we have read your letter regarding the imprisonment of our brothers and sisters. The apostle says, ‘If one member suffers, so all suffer.’ Therefore we view your imprisonment as our own. The same apostle also says, ‘Do you not know that you are God’s temple and the Spirit of God dwells in you all?’ How shall we allow the temple of God to remain imprisoned? We thank you that you have made us partakers of your travails and have shown us fruitful fields upon which we can sow the seeds of our hope unto a rich harvest. We send to you 100,000 sesterces (nearly \$4000 [1860 dollars]) as the result of a collection held among us for the cost of freeing our imprisoned brothers. The Lord protect you from similar unfortunate events, but should it please Him to take you captive, waste no time in reporting to us and be assured that we will willingly help you with our prayers and our money.” From the Christian community in Rome through the duration of three years it was reported that they cared for more than 1,500 poor, widows and sick. Such examples of Christian mercy spread a refreshing fragrance through the Christianity of all times, and are a voice saying to us, “Go and do likewise.”

If all hearts were full of such faith and such love, the care of the poor and the sick would be an easy business. Everyone — man and woman, young man and young woman — would compete with each other and, unasked, seek out need in homes and at the beds of the ill. When the individual Christian suffers, so suffers also an entire community of Christians, and [it suffers] precisely where there is all form of infirmity of life. One person is thoughtless and

pays no attention and does not notice the need, until he is made particularly aware of it. Another is particularly slothful in his willingness to sacrifice for others, and needs admonishment. Furthermore there are, in the nature of this earthly life, certain hindrances. Many are not permitted by their earthly vocation to care with their own hands for those suffering. Human shortsightedness means many needs, namely of the mentally handicapped and the needs of the poor who are too ashamed to come forward, remain hidden. Indeed, the larger a Christian community is, the more imminent the danger of overlooking those in need of assistance. In general, individual assistance can never accomplish that which is possible with unified power. In the very mother and model community of believers in Jerusalem there arose the injustice that the widows of the Greeks were being overlooked in the daily distribution of bread by the apostles. The result was a grumbling of the Greeks against the Hebrews. What did the apostles do? They did not deny that out of human weakness a mistake had taken place. They desired to remedy the problem, and counseled the community to choose, for this need, seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, so they could continue unhindered in prayer and the office of the word. This counsel pleased the entire community and without delay was put into action, as we read in Acts 6:1-6.

The entire apostolic church followed this example. From the epistles of St. Paul we see how, next to the office of bishop or elder, there was also an office of minister or deacon, and in I Tim. 3:8-13 the apostle gives recommendations on what characteristics these ministers must have. Indeed, there was also in the apostolic church an office of female servant or deaconess. Phoebe is mentioned in Romans 16:1. She was in the service of the community at Cenchrea in the neighborhood of Corinth. Her ministry consisted in the care for the poor and the sick among the women. Widows were called to this task who, according to

the apostle, were to be at least sixty years old (I TIM. 5:9). Also in the post-apostolic era we find the office of the deacons maintained and indeed with such a precise imitation of the Jerusalem model that the number of deacons serving a bishop was maintained at seven. There was a change, however, in that the circle of their official duties expanded somewhat, and certain clerical responsibilities were assigned to them, such as assisting the bishop. Also the office of the women and the deaconesses continued, and traces of it are found into the 5th and 6th centuries. Princesses and empresses were not ashamed of the office, or to be called “deaconess.” The names of Placilla, the wife of Emperor Theodosius the Great, and of Radegundis, the wife of the king of the Franks, Glothar, have been preserved for us. As deaconesses, they gave of themselves in an extraordinary way to care for the sick. Along with the offices of deacon and deaconess, there was also a particular office for men who cared for the sick in the church. They occupied a difficult and life-threatening office. With the final rise of the monastic movement and papal-dom, the care of the poor and the sick as a ministry of the community gradually became extinct and withdrew to the cloister.

It is not necessary to continue to describe the model of apostolic and post-apostolic times. The matter of Christian love demands that Christian communities aim for similar institutions, so that mercy may be demonstrated consequentially, effectively, and by all. And though we may not make exact use of the sevenfold almoners of the Jerusalem congregation, yet they teach us that concern for the poor and the sick may not be left to chance. Indeed, according to necessity, a definite number of men — whether larger or smaller — should be tasked to this end, who, in the name of the entire congregation, assure the needy of equitable and sufficient help.

There are two concerns which stand in the way of an ordered care of the poor and the sick. One concern is that a definite order is not compatible with the ready free will of mercy. There is a

concern that, by such an effort, the spirit of charity will gradually be pressed under compulsion into certain external forms. Finally, it is believed, the spirit of willing love must have to diminish. But this prejudice will fade as soon as one is convinced that such external forms and orders in no way limit love. They much rather provoke, bring forth, make effective, and direct it to the greatest possible good. If there really were such an inner dissonance between order and the free exercise of charity, as is feared, then by all means the first of the two would have to recede. But the essence of order does not alienate such love. Thus it is certainly only a misuse of the order, contrary to the nature of the Gospel, which has been asserted against an ordered exercise of charity. We do well to guard against mixing willingness with arbitrariness. Love, as free as it is, is still not arbitrary. The Lord indeed wants willing givers, but He still wants givers! He leaves it to the judgment of the individual Christian where, when, how, in what measure, and under which circumstances he demonstrates love. But He does not leave it to him as a matter of indifference whether or not he demonstrates love at all. A free, willing love and an ordered love can stand in the most beautiful harmony. This is demonstrated most clearly by the beautifully described establishment of the office of almsgiving in Jerusalem [ACTS 6]. A second prejudice is the concern that, through an ordered care of the poor, the individual, personal act of love of the individual Christian is too limited and paralyzed. But this is not the case when it is otherwise correctly conducted. Certainly the guilt lay not in the order, but in the lack of love, when through that order love should become lazy or indolent. The order only exists to assist where the assistance of the individual is not sufficient for the need. Love is like a caring house mother who orders her affairs in the best manner so that every member of the house knows what he is obliged to do. Yes, she is diligent about the affairs of the house, and she takes hold of matters where the need demands.

Indeed, the smaller a Christian community is, the less order is needed. Every member knows the other. When a need occurs, everybody knows about it. The personal willingness to act charitably has plenty of room to work. Indeed the preacher of the small congregation (who above all others is obliged to see that the poor are cared for) can oversee and carry out this care himself. If there are orphans at hand, they, in a manner most convenient, will be brought into God-fearing families, and a new home can be prepared for them. And the care of the sick presents little difficulty if only others' hearts are filled with brotherly love. It becomes more difficult the larger the congregation is. Larger congregations require an ordered way to care for the sick and assist the poor. Thus at the time of the Reformation, all cities of Germany which fell to the Gospel quickly considered how to establish such care. The cloisters, which up to then had only been the refuge of the lazy, were disbanded, turned into schools or hospitals, and their income dedicated to the service of God and the poor. The beginnings were made by the little city of Leisnig in Saxony. Scarcely had the first rays of the Gospel shone upon this city when the citizens united with the neighboring nobility, chose from their midst ten men, and put together an order of the common chest, formed in part from the available income of the cloister and in part from the freely-given contributions of a fund which was designated for this purpose. In 1523 Luther provided this order of the common chest with a foreword, hoping as he wrote that this order would become an example followed by other communities. And his hope was not mistaken. The example of Leisnig was followed by the evangelical cities of all German lands, and they established well-equipped homes for the poor and the sick. While in the papal cities and lands the custom of begging remained as before, the evangelicals could boast that no beggars were to be seen in their streets. A very intriguing history was recounted for us of the first establishment of the care of the poor in Breslau. Johan Hess, the first Lutheran preacher in Breslau (d. 1547), could no longer

accept how beggars, crippled, and mentally ill people lay on the streets and in front of all the churches in Breslau. He began to publicly admonish the governing authorities from the pulpit. But from it came no establishment of means to care for the poor in the community. Then Hess quit preaching. This had a significant effect upon the magistrate and the congregation, because he very much enjoyed preaching and they knew it. Finally they resolved to ask him why he stopped preaching. The answer was this: “My Lord Jesus lay in His members at the doors of all the churches. I can not simply step over Him. If He is not cared for, neither will I preach.” These words had a very significant influence. Places to care for the poor were prepared. Illegitimate beggars were dismissed, and in one day, 500 persons were brought to newly established hospitals. Thus there arose gradually in all the cities and villages of Lutheran Germany a well-ordered and equipped way of caring for the poor and the sick, as we now see it everywhere.

The Lutheran communities of America must however go without a very significant advantage of the communities of Germany. There entire city communities — both church and government — were communities of one faith, with the exception of cities in which the governance of the city was divided between Catholics and Lutherans. Here there are only Lutheran communities which make up a small portion of the population. There the public institutions of charity benefited from what pious organizations of earlier centuries had established. Here they can only be maintained by the modest gifts of the [Lutheran] members of the community. Indeed, the greater the difficulties which stand in our way, the greater zeal should consume us to overcome them. There is scarcely a congregation within our synod in which something is not done for the care of the poor and the sick. In some older and larger congregations it is already taking place in well-known fashion. I know of one congregation in which over 700 dollars a year is directed for care of the poor. The young men



and women have united to take over the nightly care of the sick, and through a special society a hospital is sustained. In another Lutheran community of a large city, in order to more easily oversee the care of the poor, the city has been divided into various districts, and each of four elders appeals each month to every congregational member for alms for the poor chest. The church council has to determine whether and how much assistance in each individual case of need is necessary. In another congregation, money for the poor is obtained through public collections, from which house payments, money for fuel, doctors and the cost of medicines, clothing, etc., can be had. In individual cases of need extraordinary collections are taken. A very important paper on the question: “What is the state of charity in the congregations?” is found in the report of the Eastern District of our Synod from the year 1859.

It is not my intention to lay out a proposal for an order for care of the poor, only that these lines should aim at this part of Christian love being ever more carefully tended and cultivated. This is so that these matters may be more carefully considered, and that the care of the poor could be ever more joyously brought to reality.

I conclude by putting a few questions to our congregations, preachers and elders:

1. What have we done thus far and what remains to be done in order as a collective whole, as a community, to demonstrate our faith active in love? What could and should happen in order to make our current methods of caring for the poor more effective, useful and consequential?
2. Is it a self-evident matter for us that the widows and orphans of a congregation which are to be supported also include the widows and orphans of their deceased pastor or school teacher?

3. Do we let our love also flow to strangers who are poor but who do not belong to our congregation, as did the above mentioned community at Carthage?
4. Would it not be for a larger and wealthier city congregation a very praiseworthy work to establish an orphanage in order to provide the countless forlorn, wild, despised orphans a place of refuge and to prepare for the church a school start?
5. Where do we allow our brothers and sisters to be buried? Do we begrudge their mortal remains a little space with the graves of pious Christians, so that they have rest at their side?

Finally, I leave for your consideration a word of Luther which he speaks in the Church Postil on St. Stephen's Day: "In this history you first of all see how a Christian community should be formed. Here you see a proper picture of a spiritual regimen, which the apostles here exercise. They take care of souls, and go about preaching and praying. They also see that the body is cared for, and set up certain men who dole out material goods. Thus, the Christian regimen cares for people in both body and soul, that no one suffer any need, as Luke says, 'and all are richly fed and well cared-for in both body and soul.' [ACTS 4] That is a right fine picture and example. And it would be very good, if there were the people for it, that a city such as this one [Wittenberg] be divided into four or five sections, and each section be given a preacher and a specific deacon, who would care for that section with preaching, and distribute the goods, visit sick people, and see to it that no one suffer need. However, we do not have the people for this; therefore I trust it won't happen until our Lord God makes more Christians."

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