

**Responding in Love:  
Theological Guidelines for Human Care Ministry**

**by The Board for Human Care Ministry**

<http://humancare.lcms.org>

**The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod**

**1. Theological Direction**

What we do grows out of what we believe. Consequently, the following statements seek to define and direct human care ministry in relation to the heart of our Lutheran faith, the Gospel of Jesus Christ and its essential partner, the Law of God. It is as people of the Church that we address these issues. By virtue of our Baptism, we have been united with Jesus Christ and with one another in His body, the Church. As members of that body, we have been called to and equipped for Christ-like service to one another and the world.

**2. Definition**

Stated most simply, human care ministry is the love of God reaching out through His people, the Church, ministering compassionately to the entire spectrum of human need-- spiritual, physical, emotional, social and economic. It is loving care for people on the part of those who by faith have received the saving and enabling care of a loving God. The scope of human care ministry is broad, encompassing all that Christians do to prevent and relieve human distress and to promote human development and well-being. Its focus, however, is narrow in that whatever is undertaken is based on the redemptive work of Jesus and endeavors to communicate Him to others as meaningfully as possible through the help extended.

**3. Indispensable Aspect of Mission**

Divine love has as its purpose not only to rescue us from sin and judgment but also to refashion and empower us for loving service to others. As He helps us in our needs, God enlists us as His instruments to help those around us. We cannot exempt ourselves from this helping role. To be helped, in this sense, necessarily involves becoming a helper. Inseparable from the call to salvation is the call to service, of which human care ministry is a vital part.

**4. Priority**

Human care ministry is the companion and complement to the verbal communication of Christ. It may not be regarded as an optional or marginal activity of the church. When we Christians are serious about helping others, we stimulate interest in and add credibility to our spoken and written testimonies to Christ. When the world is unimpressed by what we say, it may be because our actions do not illustrate or support our words. Human care ministry should have high priority on the Church's agenda.

## **5. A Result of the Gospel**

It is as important to distinguish human care ministry from the Gospel as it is to relate it inseparably to the Gospel. The Gospel is always and only the message that God, in love, has reconciled fallen humanity to Himself through the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of His Son. Those who accept this love by faith necessarily respond with love for their fellow human beings.

As Christians confront the diverse needs of other people, they are moved and guided by God's love toward the thoughtful and vigorous action that is human care ministry. The Gospel is the cause. Human care ministry is the result.

Christians intent on meeting human need sometimes incorrectly equate human care ministry and other efforts at human betterment with the Gospel. For example, the Social Gospel movement tended to identify progress toward a more humane and equitable society with the Gospel. Liberation Theology regards rescuing the victims of political and economic injustice as an essential element of the Gospel. In both cases, the Gospel is being confused with things which may be, in part, a result of the Gospel.

## **6. Relation to non-Christian Endeavors**

Christian human care ministry offers some services that also are provided by non-Christian agencies--counseling, adoption, refugee relief, etc. Professional techniques, standards and resources of non-Christian origin not in conflict with our Christian faith also may be employed. Financial support may be accepted from the general community as long as it places no restraint on our Christian witness.

## **7. Uniqueness**

However, there are also unique aspects to Christian human care ministry that should be cherished, cultivated and expressed. It consists both of the motivation behind the services offered (the Gospel) and the moral values (based on God's law) that shape methodologies and goals and establish limits. Pressures to compromise the Christian character of human care ministry must be recognized and resisted wherever and whenever they appear.

# **Human Care Ministry as Response**

## **1. Response**

Human care ministry is a response, not something that we initiate or generate out of our own interests or resources. It originates outside us. It occurs as we are confronted and affected by others.

## **2. Response to God**

It is a response to God. Authentic Christian human care ministry grows out of awareness of, respect for and trust in the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ through the Scriptures and Sacraments. It is response to a Person, to who He is and what He says and does. As such, it is characterized by warmth, commitment and vitality. It is a personal response in the context of the most important of all personal relationships.

## **3. Response to God's Love**

It is a response to God's love. It's not His power or His wrath or His wisdom, but rather His love that stimulates and sustains Christians in the exercise of human care ministry. This love is expressed in three magnificent forms, each of which evokes distinctive attitudinal and behavioral responses. Every expression of God's love is as unconditional as it is unmerited.

1. (a) Creative love-The Father in love created human life in all its dimensions and wills that it be cherished, protected and brought to its fullest potential. Social institutions and structures as well as individual human beings are His good gifts for the well-being and fulfillment of people.

Our planet and all creatures in it-the entire universe-have been prepared by Him for our care, use and enjoyment. Concern and respect for our fellow human beings as well as for the environment grows out of the grateful realization that they are products and objects of the Father's creative love. Gen.1; Ps.104; Col. 1:15-17. SC and LC II 9.

2. (b) Redemptive love-Divine love does not fail even in the face of human corruption and rebellion. Because of sin, everything human-even the natural order-is under God's wrath. However, His will to help, His love, transcends that wrath. His Son, Jesus Christ, in an act of sacrificial compassion, joined our human race, experienced the pain and stress of our fallen condition and finally absorbed in His own person the concentrated punishment of all human sin. His love has provided forgiveness, life and salvation for all sinners as well as the prospect of the final and complete restoration of our sin-spoiled environment. By faith, which His Holy Spirit awakens, we are able to claim the benefit of His redemptive love. The value of every human being is enhanced immeasurably by Christ's extravagant investment in that person. The heart of our motivation for Christian human care ministry is the atoning love of Jesus Christ. "We love, because He first loved us," 1 John 4:19; Rom. 8:18-25. AC II, III; AP IV; SC and LC II 25.
3. (c) Sanctifying love-The Holy Spirit lives and works within every true believer through the means of grace. By His transforming influence and power, He enables us successfully (but not perfectly) to resist the power of sin, which will continue to trouble us as long as we are in this world. In addition, He refashions our attitudes and actions after the image of Christ.

On the basis of His sanctifying love, we are confident that we can grow and improve and be effective as we carry out the ministry He has assigned to us. Similarly, trust in His sanctifying

love makes us optimistic about the potential of others to be liberated from the evils that beset them, to be changed from unbelief to faith, from rebellion to obedience, from bondage to freedom, from degradation to dignity. "By the power at work within us (He) is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think," Eph. 3:14-20; 1 Thess. 5:23. "If a man be in Christ, he is a new creature," 2 Cor.5:17. AC XX: 27-39; SC and LC II 34.

#### **4. Response to Human Need and Potential**

Human care ministry is also a response to human need and potential. Our love answers to God's love. As we turn to Him, grateful for His love in all of its aspects and eager to please and serve Him, He directs us to our fellow human beings. He needs nothing from us. They need much. His promise is that whatever we do for them, we do for Him! In assessing the needs of our fellow human beings--because we are informed and transformed by God's creative, redemptive, and sanctifying love--we look beyond the bare necessities. We recognize the marvelous possibilities even in a fallen world, for individual human development, fulfillment and happiness as well as for social progress. We recognize our privilege and responsibility to help others realize more of their God-given potential. The most urgent human need and most significant human potential have to do with a saving relationship to God and eternal life in His presence. While addressing other needs and potentials, we do so from the perspective of these ultimate concerns. Matt. 25:31-46; John 10:10; Rom. 12; James 1:27-2:17; 1 Peter 4:7-11; 1 John 3:16-18. LC II 63-65.

### **Human Care Ministry in Relation to the Gospel**

#### **1. An Aspect of Discipline**

The mission of the Church is discipling the nations. This mission is carried out as the Church presents Jesus Christ to people by both word and deed even as our Lord made Himself known by what He said as well as by what He did: by healing, feeding, accepting (Mark 1:14-45; John 17) as well as by proclamation and witness (Matt. 28:19-20).

#### **2. Relation of Word and Deed**

Five distinct but inseparable elements of the church's mission are: witness (marturia), service (diakonia), fellowship (koinonia), education (didaskalia) and worship (leitourgia). The unifying factor of these elements is Jesus Christ, who is their source and center. He is present and active and made known as His people carry out the various aspects of their ministry. All five elements include both word and deed. The verbal communication of Christ makes explicit what may only be implied in loving deeds and relationships. Unspoken testimonies to Christ through caring deeds provide vital preparation and support for the spoken Word. Without deeds, our words about Christ may seem abstract and unconvincing. Without words about Christ, our loving deeds may be ambiguous and misunderstood. 1 Cor. 13; 1 Peter 3:1-16; Luke 10:8-9. See also James references above. LC II 9.

### **3. Essential Element of Mission**

Human care ministry (diakonia, service) is an essential element of the church's mission. It is the Church meeting diverse human needs with Christ's own compassion. At every organizational level, the church must stimulate, equip and support members for significant involvement in this aspect of their mission. A vital aspect of discipling is preparing Christians to carry out their ministry of human care. Discipling involves not only converting people but also educating and equipping them for service, helping them to become functioning and effective members of His body (didaskalia, teaching). Matt.28; Eph. 4:4-16; 1 Cor. 12; 1 Thess. 3:11-13; Heb. 10:23-25.

### **4. Response and Extension**

The Gospel provides both motivation and content for human care ministry. This ministry is the Church's response to the proclamation of the Gospel, especially as it is experienced in worship with Word and Sacrament (leitourgia, worship). It is also the extension of Christ's saving and serving love through His people to one another and to the world. What we have to give people in need is not only our own concern and help, but Christ. John 15:1-17.

### **5. Strives to Include Verbal Witness**

Human care ministry is done with the hope and expectation that it will create opportunities for the verbal sharing of the Gospel of Jesus (marturia, witness). To be authentic and effective, such sharing must be done in a sensitive and non-manipulative manner, relating Christ to the perceived needs and life situations of the persons addressed. With an accompanying explicit verbal witness to Christ, human care ministry renders its most valuable service. Eph. 4:29; 1 Thess. 2:1-13.

### **6. Valid and Essential in Its Own Right**

Human care ministry is valid and necessary even when opportunities for verbal witness to Christ are not present or utilized. However, the Church should carry out human care ministry in such a way as to create and take fullest advantage of opportunities to communicate Christ in both word and deed to those who are being served. 1 Cor. 13; James 2:18-26.

### **7. Should be Done by the Church**

The context for human care ministry is the Christian community (koinonia, fellowship). Because that is true, wherever possible it should be done by those who are the Church and have a common, consistent and informed understanding of the Church's teachings. Christ can be communicated most clearly and effectively by those who know and trust Him and whom His Spirit is guiding. Eph. 4:11-16.

### **8. The Approved Interpretation**

Human Care ministry reflects the understanding and interpretation of the Gospel held by the sponsoring church.

## **9. Doctrinal and Ethical Agreement**

In cooperative human care ministries involving other Christian bodies, agreement on matters of faith and practice that pertain to elements of the shared ministry (e.g., pregnancy and marriage counseling) is essential.

## **10. Cooperation Without Compromise**

The Church may work with or give support to secular and other human care efforts, unless by so doing, it confuses or weakens its witness to Christ's love.

# **Human Care Ministry in Relation to God's Law**

## **1. Root Problem**

The root problem beneath all human disorder and misery is the total depravity of man since the fall, evidenced in his continued inclination to revolt against God, to exploit other persons and to destroy self and the environment. This is manifest in defiant rejection of the Creator and His good will and results in increasing bondage to Satan and divine condemnation. Of himself, man is unable to escape from sin and its consequences. Gen. 3-4; Rom. 5-8; Eph. 2:1-3.

## **2. Describes and Prescribes What is Best**

God's Law is His will for man. It describes attitudes and behaviors that best serve the interest and well-being of human creatures. For their own good, God requires human beings to obey His Law. Ps. 119.

## **3. In the Heart and in Scripture**

In fragmentary and distorted forms, God's Law is "written in the hearts" of all people. In clarified and authoritative forms, it is revealed in the inspired and inerrant Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Rom. 2:12-16; Ex.20:1-17; Matt.5. Ap IV 5-8.

## **4. Prepares for the Gospel**

The chief purpose of God's Law is to expose and condemn human sinfulness in order to prepare people for His forgiving and transforming love, which is offered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Only those who understand their problems in terms of God's Law (cf. C. 1. above) can fully appreciate the ultimate solution which God has provided in His Son. Rom. 3:19-20; Gal. 3:19-22. SA-III II 4-5, FC SD v.

## **5. Moral Guidance for Christians**

While the Gospel provides motivation and content for human care ministry, God's Law provides direction. To the true believer who is forgiven by faith in the Gospel and who, therefore, is undergoing spiritual and moral transformation through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, God's

Law also provides essential moral guidance. This distinction between the Gospel as motivator and the Law as guide is essential. To seek to motivate Christians with the Law is both incorrect and ineffective. When confronted with important life decisions, the Christian should be referred to appropriate elements of God's Law and assured of their validity, authority and relevance. The Christian engaged in or contemplating behavior contrary to God's will needs to hear the warning and condemnation of God's Law. Matt. 5:17-48; 1 Cor. 14:33-34; Eph. 6:1-4, LC Pref. 17; FC SD vi.

## **6. Relevance to Non-Christians**

Although the non-Christian lacks the motivating presence and power of the Holy Spirit, he also needs and can benefit from the testimony of God's Law. For his own temporal well-being and that of society (cf. C.2. above), he should be encouraged to order his life according to God's will. This is possible to a limited extent on the basis of reason and self-interest (civil righteousness). Most importantly, as the opportunity arises he should be made aware of his inability to measure up to God's expectations and, therefore, of his need for pardon and power through Christ. Rom. 2:1; Tim. 1:8-11. Ap II 12, XVII 4-8.

## **7. The Church's Ministry of Law**

An essential aspect of the Church's ministry is the affirmation and application of God's Law for its intended purposes to both Christians and non-Christians. The application of God's Law, like that of the Gospel, must be done in a sensitive manner. The one who proclaims the Law must identify himself as a fellow sinner who is also fully dependent upon Jesus Christ for righteousness. He also may testify to the helpfulness of God's Law as a guide for his personal life.

## **8. Authoritative Ethical Norms**

Although some Biblical ethical norms are historically and culturally conditioned, others are absolutes and, therefore, universally binding. A vital and challenging task in the contemporary church is helping Christians identify and apply Biblical ethical norms. We are faced with growing numbers of moral issues unknown in the Biblical era (e.g., nuclear warfare, in vitro fertilization, massive environmental pollution). Furthermore, there are cases in which Biblical norms and values appear to conflict with one another (e.g., telling the truth at times may harm or destroy others, or helping one person or element in society may hinder others).

The ethical task is fraught with ambiguities despite the many clear and binding ethical norms revealed in Scripture.

## **9. To Be Conveyed in Human Care**

The human care ministries of the Church are done with integrity and faithfulness and are best able to meet the needs of people as they convey with conviction God's Law as well as His Gospel.

## **10. The Approved Interpretation**

Human care ministry reflects the understanding and interpretation of God's Law held by the sponsoring church.

### **Ministry to Social Structures: Relating Christian Values to Social Regulation and Policy**

#### **1. How Christians Determine What is Right and Wrong**

Moral judgments of Christian individuals and groups are to be based on the knowledge of God's will as revealed by the Holy Spirit through Scripture, interpreted and applied with the help of reason, exemplified in the life of Christ. Christians often disagree in their moral judgments.

#### **2. Christian Ethical Motivation**

Love for God and people engendered by the Gospel motivates Christians to conform to God's will. To love is to care, and to care is to help. In addition to private response, there are also vast opportunities to help people through development of legislation and public policy. LC I 141-60.

#### **3. Dual Role**

In a democratic society, Christians have privileges and responsibilities of rulers (to shape regulations and policies) as well as those of subjects (to obey). Faithfulness to our calling involves conscientious functioning in both roles. Rom. 13:1-10; 1 Peter 2:13-17. AC XVI.

#### **4. Norms for Social Regulation and Policy**

Society is regulated by the natural knowledge of God's Law (Second Table) as known and applied by reason-not by the Gospel or by distinctively Christian values.

#### **5. Motivation for Obedience to Social Regulations**

Non-Christian citizens are motivated to conform to laws and regulations of society by various forms of individual or collective self-interest and civil righteousness. Christian citizens are to be motivated to conform to them by love for God and people, engendered by the Gospel. Rom. 13:5-8.

#### **6. Direction of Christian Social Influence**

Christians should work through the political process to try to bring the regulations and policies of society into greater conformity with God's will, for example, to promote justice, peace, compassion, decency and sanctity of life. There are cases in which the political process fails to deal adequately with grave social evils. In such an event, Christians must aid the victims of these evils, protest the evils through responsible dissent and work for remedies through continuing



political involvement. Motivation for this is to be love for God and people engendered by the Gospel. Micah 6:8. AC XVI, XXVIII 12-8; LC I 240- 53,III 71.

## **7. Means by Which Christians Seek Support**

In addressing the secular community, Christians should appeal to the natural knowledge of the Law, reason and self interest, not distinctive Christian values.

## **8. Lack of Christian Consensus**

Units of the Christian community (individuals congregations, districts, denominations, etc.) do not often attain consensus on public policy issues, ethical questions or the manner in which social regulation and policy should respond to them. No unit of the Christian community can speak for the entire community.

## **9. Preparing Christians for Social-Political Involvement**

Christian communities should stimulate discussion and reflection on the relation between Christian ethical values and social regulation and policy and motivate Christians to participate actively in the social-political decision making processes. They should strive to attain consensus on these issues. When attained, the consensus should be expressed and advocated for the guidance of individuals and groups in their communities.

## **10. Uniting for Action**

Christians should unite individually and collectively for political action with other like-minded citizens--Christian and non-Christian--to accomplish the changes in social regulation and policy to which they are committed.