
CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF COMPASSION

The Opportunity is Ours

[Galatians 6:10](#)

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

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Cultivating a Culture of Compassion: The Opportunity is Ours

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COMPASSION MINISTRY: A DANGEROUS THING

It all had started so innocently. Rick needed money.¹ I gave him a few dollars. Then, Rick needed a ride to see his sons. I gave him a ride. Later, Rick needed a job. I gave him work around the church. Soon, Rick needed a place to eat his meals. I gave him the kitchen. Finally, Rick needed a place to sleep—it was getting cold out, after all, and though the winter streets were unforgiving, the homeless shelters were far worse. So, I gave him the church.

As the Detroit snow melted, Rick—by this time a confirmed member of the church—left. With spring in full bloom, our little group of members went around the property, trying to clean up. Someone asked for the leaf blower. I looked for it without any luck. Another member asked about a shop vac. I knew we had two, but neither was to be found. We needed to replace some light bulbs. I checked for the new ladder we had stored away. That was gone. Strange, I thought to myself. Immediately, I heard a crash. Rushing upstairs, I found a couple of prospects staring at a gaping hole in our entry's ceiling. Fallen plaster had smashed the well-worn sofa underneath. I quickly forgot about the missing items. On to the next.

Two men came to fix the ceiling. The job took a couple of days. Rick returned one of those nights to stay at the church. Before morning came, Rick was gone, and so was the workers' electric saw. All at once, the mystery of the missing property was solved.

I remember that feeling. If this were a negligent accident, I could perhaps understand. But after all my time, my dollars, my benevolence, my trust, my sharing the gospel with him—how *dare* he?

Rick returned, months later, out of desperation. He knew I knew. As he sat across from me in my office, I listened to his excuses about being an addict and needing money. He asked for forgiveness. I forgave him, expecting a new life springing forth from such magnificent grace that would make Jean Valjean's about-face look infantile.² But the asks started right back up again. He needed a twenty for this and a twenty for that. Our guarded relationship went on like that until he went to jail for selling drugs to an undercover agent. Before heading to jail, he came to

1. Not his real name.

2. Jean Valjean is the hero of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* published in 1862. Upon Valjean's release from prison after serving years of forced labor for stealing a loaf of bread, he stole silverware from a kindly priest in the middle of the night. When the police arrested him and dragged him before the priest, the priest let him know he must have left in such a hurry that he'd forgotten to take the candlesticks as well. To the amazement of the police and Valjean, the priest vouched for the thief, and the police went away. It's in the face of this grace that Valjean was a changed man, and at the insistence of the priest, used the silver to start a new life, which he did, and became a benefactor for the underprivileged, remembering the grace that was shown him.

church and asked me to privately commune him. I asked if he was repentant. He said, “No. I did what I had to do. I’d do it again tomorrow.”

This story encapsulates much of what Christians need to know about compassion ministry, and what not to do. It often starts small, but quickly can become overwhelming, lead to disdain, and end in an oath never to pity so much as an abandoned child ever again.³

Rick’s story and many like his over the last six years of my ministry have impressed this upon me: the place compassion ministry will take you is a deep and dangerous place.⁴ Suffering is where Satan lives—it’s what he longs for. If you are thinking you want to get into compassion ministry because it seems trendy these days, or for social media cred, or to build your church’s brand in the community, or to increase your Sunday attendance, heed this warning: you will not come out unscathed.⁵ You are about to embark on a mission that could shipwreck your very faith in a compassionate God. Compassion means to “suffer with.” So, if you are so bold as to do the work of real compassion ministry with the eternal life of the other in your heart and mind, buckle up, because you’re going after the forces of evil themselves.⁶

And yet, as Christ’s Church, we are *called* to reach out to the suffering with the water of eternal life. Our Great Physician came for not the healthy but the sick. The widow, the orphan, the sinner, the sick, the downtrodden, the brokenhearted, the poor, the hungry, the immigrant and the destitute—these precious ones are also our mission field. We must go about our lives with our hearts full of Spirit and truth, acting with compassion as one neighbor to another. And so, here is my thesis as I work to grasp the depth of this topic of compassion ministry in the parish:

We have the opportunity and duty to intentionally do good to those within our churches and communities through the compassionate proclamation and practice of the gospel.

I have not practiced compassion ministry well. In part, this is because I have not understood what the problems are, what compassion ministry is, how it is properly applied, and

3. “Mercy is a door, and opening, an invitation to touch a life, to make a difference. But it is not a destination. Those of us who get stuck in mercy ministry find ourselves growing impatient with recipients of our kindness, wondering why they don’t help themselves more, fueling a growing discomfort with the half-truths they tell us to justify their persistent returns for more handouts. Mercy that doesn’t move intentionally in the direction of development (justice) will end up doing more harm than good—to both giver and recipient” [Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)* (New York: Harper One, 2011), 42].

4. “Compassion is a dangerous thing. It can open a person to all manner of risks” (Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 39).

5. “Mercy responds to human need and suffering, whether spiritual or physical. The church doesn’t reach out to those in need with some whiz-bang program *because it’s guaranteed to fill pews*. Proclaiming Jesus and loving the neighbor has to do with who and what the church is as the body of Christ” [Matthew C. Harrison, “The Church is a Mercy Place!” (St. Louis: LC-MS World Relief and Human Care Series, 2004, reprinted 2019), 2].

6. “The word *compassion* is derived from the Latin *pati* and *cum*, which together mean ‘to suffer with.’ Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears” [Henri J.M. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 3-4].

how it's integrated into the overall work of the local church. Now, even after countless hours of study and nearly 200 pages of notes from books, articles, essays, studies, fourteen personal interviews with men doing the work, and my own experiences serving an underserved community, I do not claim to be an expert on this topic. This is the great, stubborn tension: there is no life hack for compassion ministry, no silver bullet. By definition, *compassion* must always involve *suffering* and *sacrifice*. As I work to answer the practical questions surrounding compassion ministry, I will develop my above thesis in three parts:

1. Pitfalls, fears, and opportunities of compassion ministry
2. A vision for compassion ministry in the Christian congregation
3. Cultivating a culture of compassion in a congregation

I pray what follows can generate discussion among God's people and serve to the glory of God and his kingdom.

1. PITFALLS, FEARS, AND OPPORTUNITIES OF COMPASSION MINISTRY

Scripture lays out the mandate for compassion ministry in both the Old and New Testaments, not just for the individual, but for the local church and the church at large. Paul writes, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal 6:10 NIV). This mandate, along with others like it, does not solely call the individual believer to action in his or her life of sanctification through his or her vocation.⁷ In addition, Paul and others exhort a *plural* call to action, urging Christians to be wise in pooling their resources rather than only carrying out their lives of sanctification on their own. Therefore, Christ calls his New Testament Church to preach the gospel. We do not diminish that vital task! *And* Christ calls his New Testament Church to love one another and to love their neighbors. Both these missions are unique to the Church. Only we can preach the gospel *and* love in a way that the world cannot.

When acted out, compassion ministry responds appropriately to the pain point of another.⁸ Usually, compassion ministry steps in to help those who are unable to help themselves and are more often overlooked. As we have seen from our first two essays, Scripture and church

7. Zech 7:9-10; Col 3:12; 2 Cor 1:3-4; Phil 2:1-3.

8. John T. Pless describes Christ's compassion toward us in this way: "Mercy is the Lord's compassionate action towards sinful human beings and that he does not leave us alone with our sin, forsaking us to death and condemnation, but instead rescues us by his death and resurrection to live with him" [John T. Pless, "Answering the Why Questions: Martin Luther on Human Suffering and God's Mercy" (St. Louis: LC-MS World Relief and Human Care Series, 2005, reprinted 2019), 10]. I find this especially insightful as a working definition of a Christian's life of compassion—staying with a suffering one, not leaving them alone in their pain or sin. He goes on to write: "Christ hides behind the mask of the sick and needy to receive the service from us. To run away from an infected neighbor is to run away from Christ himself" (Pless, "Mercy," 15). While there is a time to "flee" and that is not forbidden, Luther notes, the act of compassion is simply to stay with the suffering, to attach yourself to the one who needs you. In this way, we respond to the pain point of another.

history provide us with the basis for and examples of such compassion ministry: helping the poor, the sinful, the destitute, the orphan, the widow, the oppressed, the foreigner, and others who struggle to help themselves.

Pitfalls: The Social Gospel Movement and Reactions Against

In the last 150 years, concerning compassion ministry, the Church has erred in two major ways. Both of these ways neglected or undervalued part of our work—to preach the gospel *and* love our neighbor.

The first pitfall started in earnest around 150 years ago, becoming known as the Social Gospel movement. It was borne quite naturally in poor, urban centers. Pastors and other leaders in primarily mainline Protestant denominations saw their communities suffer as a result of circumstances and sin and wanted to respond with *love*. They wanted to lift up the lowly, heal the brokenhearted, and bring justice to the oppressed. Yet, while glimmers of gospel preaching remained in various places where the Social Gospel predominated, overall, the *Kingdom of God* was no longer a thing “not of this world,” but a desired outcome in the *here and now*. In other words, feeding the poor *became* the gospel. Changing political systems to liberate the oppressed would bring about God’s Kingdom here on earth. Social Gospel historian Chris Evans writes, “A critical principle of the early twentieth-century Social Gospel as it matured theologically: one’s personal faith went hand in hand with one’s desire to embrace a social faith committed to the transformation of society.”⁹ Ironically, the spirit of the culture drove much of this religion. The progress-oriented, atheistic philosophy of Darwin and Marx fueled the drive of Christians to seek heaven on earth. As liberal-leaning churches dismissed the notion of core Christian doctrines like atonement and heaven and hell, the gospel of Christ and the forgiveness of sins receded from sermons, giving way to talks about political candidates and here-and-now action.

Since around the Ronald Reagan era, however, the power shifted from what we might consider a “liberal” to a “conservative” flavor of the Social Gospel.¹⁰ Conservative news outlets today reflect that shift, and ironically, many modern Christians who would be vehemently opposed to the Social Gospel of the early 20th century have been unwittingly swept up into the Social Gospel of the late 20th and early 21st century. The same tenet undergirds both: “If only we just had the right people in the presidency, house, and supreme court—if only we could create the perfect system—we would achieve peace on earth.” This belief pervades the Social Gospel in the past as much as in the present. Both ultimately offer false hope. Evans notes, “While an increasing number of leaders who came out of churches with historical connections to the earlier Social Gospel distance themselves from the early rhetoric of making America a Protestant nation, numerous evangelicals picked up on the older Social Gospel quest to Christianize America, even as most of them rejected the progressive political and theological visions

9. Christopher H. Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 104.

10. Evans, 199.

espoused by social gospel leaders like Walter Rauschenbusch.”¹¹ In various forms, then, the Social Gospel continues to affect the Church today under the banner of “Christianity.” And so, the Social Gospel, which first sprang out of a desire to show Christian love to the suffering, soon turned the main work of the church into political involvement, earthly problem alleviation, and kingdom building.

This brings us to our second pitfall. As a response against the Social Gospel movement, theologically conservative churches dug in. Pastors of our own church body in several essays over decades past wrote against the Social Gospel to keep its principles from creeping into our churches and work. In various ways, several of these essays stated the work of the church is *not* to alleviate suffering in the world, although compassion ministry *might* serve as a sort of “bridge to the gospel.”¹² Rather, the church’s mission and marks are the pure preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments. Through solid preaching, the gospel will motivate God’s people to carry out acts of love in their vocations. Again, it seems that this desire to keep God’s Kingdom “not of this world” was the response to the Social Gospel trying to make God’s Kingdom “of this world.”

Nonetheless, just as the Social Gospel led to a watering down of Scripture’s emphasis on certain doctrines (primarily those of atonement and hell), the reaction against this push in the church at large led to a watering down of Scripture’s emphasis on compassion (welcoming the immigrant, taking care of the oppressed, showing acts of mercy in the community, etc.). And so, what first sprang out of a desire to keep the false theology of the Social Gospel out of the church resulted in what Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert label “Evangelical Gnosticism.” The result looks like this: “God is Lord of the spiritual realm—Sunday worship, devotions, evangelism, discipleship, etc.—but is largely irrelevant to the ‘physical’ or ‘secular’ realms.... This sacred-

11. Evans, 194. Rauschenbusch is considered the godfather of the Social Gospel movement. His father was a German Lutheran 5th generation minister. His son, Walter, became a Baptist, and cut his teeth in the 19th-century slums of New York City.

12. Thomas Nass, “The Church and its Ministry” (WLS Essay File. September 2008), <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/3397/NassChurch.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
Ernst H. Wendland. “A Theology of Liberation” (WLS Essay File. *Not dated*), <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/651/WendlandLiberation.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

Irwin J. Habeck, “An Evaluation of the Term ‘Christ’s Ministry to the Whole Man’” (WLS Essay File. September 30, 1968), <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/1955/HabeckEvaluation.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

E.W. Fredrich, “How Much Room is there on the church’s agenda for social issues?” (Presented to Chicago Pastoral Conference, Zion, Illinois. WLS Essay File, November 13, 1979), <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/1513/FredrichAgenda.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

Armin W. Schuetze, “Scriptural Principles with Respect to the Church’s mission and Christian Welfare Work” (WLS Essay File, *no date given*), <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/3074/SchuetzeWelfare.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

Wayne Mueller, “One Lord, One Church, One Ministry” (Presented to the Western Wisconsin District Convention, Martin Luther Preparatory School, Prairie du Chien, WI. WLS Essay File, June 7, 1988), <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/3374/MuellerLord.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

secular divide severely cripples Christianity in North America, making it irrelevant to the day-to-day functioning of our individual lives and culture.”¹³

What then is the appropriate way forward? How should we be thinking about compassion ministry? How do we faithfully proclaim the true gospel *and* engage our people and our communities with Christian acts of mercy? I propose we cannot have one without the other. Both are mandates. The practice of one validates the other. And the Church in 2022 and beyond has an incredible opportunity to get into our hostile world with a message of love and deeds of love, *both of which* are countercultural, both of which the Church alone is equipped to carry out, and both of which *together* have the power through the Spirit’s working to knock down walls and build lives centered around Christ.

Fears: Why Carrying Out Compassion Ministry Makes Us Queasy

What holds us back from carrying out compassion ministry? Through study, conversation, and personal experience, I’ve encountered four main fears which detract from this work.

The first has to do with *missiology*. Some will quote the Confessions: The marks of the church are the preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments. That’s it. Our churches should not get involved in earthly matters. This will only distract from the gospel in Word and sacrament. Furthermore, where do we draw the line? If we start giving sandwiches to the homeless, soon we’ll be lobbying in front of city hall for cause *x, y, or z*. Where does mercy ministry end? Will it consume our mission of preaching the gospel?

These are valid concerns. My encouragement here would be this: embrace the tension. Scripture mandates both truth and love, so we practice both, working hard at the tension that will come up between the two. And if we obey both commands individually, why not obey both God’s commands corporately? Why divide soul from body, both of which will dwell with God forever in the new heavens and new earth?¹⁴ We work to engage people in their suffering

13. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 90. The authors also note that from around 1900-1930, there was a “Great Reversal” in the evangelical church *against* the social gospel. They also note that this shift preceded the welfare state in America (FDR’s new deal policies were launched in the 1930s, and Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty in the 1960s). So, the authors believe, that the “church’s retreat from poverty alleviation was fundamentally due to shifts in theology and not—as many have asserted—to government programs that drove the church away from ministry to the poor” (Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 44). Rather than “Spiritual Gnosticism,” Reed Lessing describes this theological attitude as “dualism,” namely, “where spiritual issues are divorced from social issues, as if the latter were of no spiritual significance” [Reed Lessing, “Mercy in the Old Testament” (St. Louis: LC-MS World Relief and Human Care Series, 2004, reprinted 2019), 15]. In his work, he traces Amos (et al.) primarily speaking against such believers who worshipped corporately but neglected the needy.

14. Corbett and Fikkert reference Colossians 1:19-20 as they consider the “fullness” of Christ’s reconciliation—“all things,” not just soul. “Jesus is not just ‘beaming up’ our souls out of planet earth in Star Trek fashion; rather, Jesus is bringing reconciliation to every last speck of the universe . . .” (Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 73). “‘Colossians 1 Jesus’ doesn’t ask us to stop being humans in this world or the next. Rather, ‘Colossians 1 Jesus’ cares about our bodies, cares about our souls, and cares about the entire world that those bodies and souls are experiencing” (Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 248).

because of the law of love, and yet we realize that if this is *all* we do—at the expense of the gospel message itself—then we have lost our full “now, not yet” theology! And yet, if we only engage with the gospel—at the expense of helping these brothers and sisters in a time of need—then we run the risk of turning the gospel message into the sound of a clanging cymbal.¹⁵ If someone says the work of the church is only to preach the gospel, then the church might reconsider the effort spent paying its electric bill or watering its hostas. But the bills and the hostas are attended to toward the same end of sharing love—so people glorify their Father in heaven. We can and must practice *both* proclamation and compassion, keeping the two in tension. In this way, we will truly be light and salt in a dark and rotting world! By our love, the world will know we are Christ’s disciples!¹⁶

The second fear has to do with *resources*. We don’t have enough human or monetary resources to engage in a mercy ministry. Pastor is way overworked. We can’t add another program. We already must staff education, facilities, worship, council, elders, evangelism, and more. This might be an eighth or ninth priority, and we can’t properly do it. Furthermore, outreach and worship have immediate benefits for our church—we don’t see the benefits of helping the suffering one among us or in our communities.¹⁷ We don’t have anyone who speaks the language of the people over here, or who is from the culture of the people over there. We don’t have the resources to engage in mercy ministry.

These are legitimate concerns. However, my encouragement is to think creatively—utilize *other* resources. Lucas Bitter serves as the pastor of Intown Lutheran in Atlanta and works with local nonprofits that are already engaging their communities. He allows them to use his space and works with them out in the community. This allows for minimal prep time on his end

15. In his essay on OT compassion, Reed Lessing traces this disconnect as the main problem prophets such as Amos addressed. “Worshippers attended to the liturgical festivals, but justice and righteousness failed to flow out into the irrigation channels of daily life in relationships” (Lessing, “Mercy in the Old Testament,” 13). To this point, the Lutheran Church of Australia formulated this idea: “The church’s ministry of mercy is a vital part of its existence. It cannot exist without worship (*leitourgia*) in which God speaks and acts in mercy and God’s people respond in praise. It exists for witness to the gospel (Greek, *martyria*). But the genuineness of both worship and witness must be called into question where there is no ministry of mercy (*diakonia*), where faith is without works. The diaconic Work of the church is tangible evidence of its servant role in the world (*diakonos* is Greek for servant or waiter). Worship, witness and service belong together as functions of the church” [Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations of the Lutheran Church of Australia, “One Loving God: Two Hands—Saving and Caring: A Paper of the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations of the Lutheran Church of Australia” (St. Louis: LC-MS World Relief and Human Care Series, 2003, reprinted 2019), 4].

16. For the Christian who sincerely asks, “Why should the church care for those in need? ‘I’m still not convinced it should. The church should be about preaching and the administration of the sacraments, period.’ Well, you would certainly agree that each individual has the mandate to be merciful to others within his/her vocation (‘Here consider your station in life’)... So that you begin to see mercy as the church’s corporate task, consider St. Paul’s collection for the needy church in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1ff; Acts 11:28; 2 Cor 8:1-15; 9:12-14; and Acts 24:7).” (Harrison, “The Church is a Mercy Place!”, 3).

17. Consider, of course, the benefits of getting into the mess of someone’s life. It allows us to talk about how we too hurt and need a Savior. The faith becomes a part of their real needs in their real life, rather than just existing in formal Word and worship and sacrament. Compassion ministry allows us to express what’s hurting us. We engage others about our and their failures and temptations. It helps us to be more human, in a sense. We get to bring their issues into the reality of the now but not yet, the restoration of the image of God, a foretaste of heaven, where we fully experience his image. We get that in compassion ministry to others.

and leads to being able to show mercy toward both the non-profits and the people they serve! Think of all the people you could engage with in acts of mercy and with minimal expenditure of church resources! Furthermore, even if you have 30 members, perhaps two have been waiting for you to give them the chance to use their gift of compassion.

The third fear has to do with the *who, what, and how*. It's not easy to decide *whom* to serve! Who is my "neighbor" that I should help? There are swindlers all around me looking for easy handouts; there are people from foreign countries contacting me through Facebook to donate to an orphanage! *Whom* do we help? Also, *what* do we do? Some churches find themselves in poorer areas and see several non-profits and government agencies already at work. Where would we fit in? Other congregations are in wealthier areas and do not see a need for any sort of mercy work. Finally, *how* do we show mercy? Once we start, will we not get lost in a never-ending vacuum of human needs?

Again, these fears are not unfounded. Consider starting *near* and *small*. Who in your congregation is experiencing some impediment that is keeping them from fully participating in the fellowship of believers? Connect your heart to that person to work to restore them to the family of God. Start within your congregation. As people begin to see their pastor working to alleviate the suffering of the people, they will start to see that this is an important thing to do. They will start to notice people around them in their vocations outside the church who are suffering, who need the gospel *and* counseling regarding their recent divorce, their abortion, or their daughter's suicide. Then, you will see opportunities one after another to apply acts of mercy as you bring the Word and meet their physical or emotional needs. Don't think "mercy ministry is another program"; think "it's a way of life." Compassion is the same divine impulse that pushes the Christian to evangelize the lost *and* love their neighbor. Compassion isn't a program, it's a culture. It isn't just what we do, it's who we are.

Finally, the fourth fear is perhaps the fear that underlies the first three. It's the one that I have most intensely experienced. I am "fearful" of compassion ministry because I've been burned before. Therefore, I don't want to expose myself to such hurt and abuse ever again. Luther felt the same temptation in his role as under-shepherd:

This the devil strives after: When he sees that you want to do good to your neighbor and use your possessions to good purpose, he says: In that case I will make matters bitter and sour enough for you. Then nature is unable to bear the strain, and love and benefactions are checked in the finest and best people.... Well, such things happen in secular matters, in cities and homes, among neighbors and friends, but they are much more numerous and oppressive in spiritual matters, where a minister or keeper of souls is concerned about his parishioners with all faithfulness, must watch and care for them, and must bear so much that body and soul and heart are full of pain. Yet he will earn no more than this, that people are more hostile to him than to anyone else. Well, what are we to do? If we were

to act or not act in accordance with the wickedness of the world, we would never do anything good.¹⁸

Mez McConnell and Mike McKinley agree with this—when serving people in compassion ministry, we better believe we will get burned!¹⁹ If you enter a mess, expect things to be messy! Yet, Tim Keller suggests we often fall into this last temptation to numb ourselves to guilt. That is, we feel guilt over *not* helping everyone because we are not *actively* helping anyone. Instead, we are always *reacting* as countless situations arise.²⁰ This reactive approach quickly leads to compassion fatigue, and subsequently, Keller argues, guilt.

And then we recall Jesus, who “made himself nothing” for the sake of the suffering, and we see an unimaginable, proactive, saving act of compassion for sinners. He cut himself off from the land of the living for the sake of the other. His compassion is the great “downward pull.”²¹ He considered it not a waste to spend every heavenly resource to save sinners, many of whom would reject and squander the gift.²² This gospel heals us even today.²³

18. Martin Luther, “What Luther Says: An Anthology,” Volume II. Ministers, ed. Ewald M. Plass, p.923-942 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 931.

19. Mez McConnell and Mike McKinley, *Church in Hard Places* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 176.

20. Tim Keller, “Blueprint for Revival: Social Concern,” a sermon preached at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, September 2, 1990, YouTube video, 32:55ff, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UM-6IUUO6Qw&ab_channel=GospelinLife.

21. “Jesus’ compassion is characterized by a downward pull. That is what disturbs us. We cannot even think about ourselves in terms other than those of an upward pull, and upward mobility in which we strive for better lives, higher salaries, and more prestigious positions. Thus, we are deeply disturbed by a guy who embodies a downward movement” (Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection*, 24-25).

22. Our Savior from sin is also our model for compassion ministry. Jesus models the perfect attitude with respect to showing mercy to the seemingly undeserving: “Accordingly, Christian love may be ‘lost’ or ‘wasted’ on those who do not deserve it. Our love may be abused or put to evil purposes. It may be returned to us in the form of hatred or scorn. Many certainly will take advantage of us. This is not an excuse for naivete in the performance of our good works. But such is the pattern of Christian love. It is given as God has given his love in Christ; fully, without reserve, and without the expectation of reward. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Christian vocation is participation in the cross of Christ, and the most mysterious, is that it is a gift” [Jacob A. O. Preus, III, “The Vocation of Every Christian Life in Christ as a Holy Calling” (St. Louis: LC-MS World Relief and Human Care Series, 2019), 15].

23. “We suspect that, like us, you prefer people to whom you have a natural affinity.... Jesus Christ identified himself with those whose personalities or abnormalities cut them off from others. He identified with the demon-possessed, the blind, the diseased and the dead. In order to reach those who feel cut off from the living, he was cut out of the land of the living. It is not our nature to identify with an accursed thing or person. You and I see the afflicted, and we back up. We are repulsed by crime, disease, sickness and death. We have an aversion for the tormented, the odd and the unacceptable. I remember years ago when I saw clients who were abused sexually as children. I have never been abused, and I know that I have the privilege of having a mind completely free from any memories of abuse. I can walk through life and never have to worry about such a memory floating to the surface of my mind or being triggered by something in my environment. Because it doesn't exist. One person I saw in the early years was a woman who had been horribly abused sexually as a child. I found myself experiencing just a bit of the trauma she had experienced as I connected with her. I didn't like those feelings and thoughts. I wrestled with myself, voicing my preferences: I don't want to do this kind of work. I don't even want these pictures in my brain, affecting me in this manner. But Jesus did. Jesus who in his relationship with, and saving ministry to all of mankind, lays aside the constant use of his divine power and glory, now becomes like a servant and lets himself be made like those he served. Jesus, who is God untouched by the muck and the mire of sin, did not think about what he had as a thing

Think of your church. Imagine every other car that drove past knew your church preached the Word of God *and* loved the suffering in your church and community. Picture that little WELS logo on our church signs evoking joy in the hearts of people: “This church will not sacrifice truth, but man they will do anything for you! They help others relentlessly: their love gushes out of their mouths *and* their hands.”²⁴

Because of the clear gospel of a compassionate God that courses through our WELS congregations, we are uniquely postured to help every single person in our membership and to see that love pulsate out into their homes and to their neighbors. Such unique love attracts more and more people to a God worthy of their devotion.²⁵ We are not about the business of creating a utopian synod. We are not so naïve as to think we will break the curse of sin before that Great Day. But we are about following Christ’s command to bring his truth *and* love to those around us. Think of the opportunities!

Opportunities: That Good May be Done to All People, Especially to Believers!

We show mercy to others simply because Christ calls on us to do so. If we preach the truth but do not have love, we are nothing. The church thrives where both are present. Compassion ministry is costly—at varying levels, it can cost many dollars and hours and emotional stamina—sometimes with little immediate “reward.” And yet, with much or little direct guidance from the pulpit, Christians have naturally embarked on personal and corporate compassion campaigns since Christ walked the earth. “Wherever the church breathes in the blessed gospel and sacraments, it cannot but exhale mercy and love toward the neighbor.”²⁶ This very fact shows how *natural* compassion ministry is to the believer whose heart is loaded for bear with Christ’s compassion. We can sense the opportunities to be compassionate. Like Paul says, “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal 6:10). These “opportunities” we can carry out as a church and as individuals of the church.

Our Lutheran forefathers did not ignore the compassionate care of the needy in and outside of their churches. Like Paul, they saw the plethora of opportunities for compassion ministry.

Luther, for one, in 1519 lamented the fact that the mass and the collect of the mass were relegated to prayers with no action attached for the needy:

to be grasped, namely the glories of heaven, but in the incarnation became like a servant and let himself be made like those he served.... The shepherd we desire did not seek to build his reputation. He emptied himself of those things that elevated him” [Bryan Salminen and David Maier, “Man of God: Take Heed Unto Yourself.” (St. Louis: LC-MS World Relief and Human Care Series, 2011, reprinted 2019), 22-23].

24. “Christ’s Love, Our Calling.” What a glorious motto!

25. Tim Bourman shared that he promises to each new confirmand: “We will have your back. That’s my pledge to you. You’re a part of the family now” (Tim Bourman, Pastor of Sure Foundation Lutheran Church, New York City, interview via Zoom with author, June 13, 2022).

26. Matthew Harrison, “The Church’s Role of Mercy in the Community” (St. Louis: LC-MS, 2004, reprinted 2019), 4.

So we at present see our sorrow that many masses are held and yet the Christian fellowship which should be preached, practiced, and kept before us by Christ's example has virtually perished. So much so that we hardly know anymore what purpose this sacrament serves or how it should be used. Indeed, with our mass we frequently destroy this fellowship and pervert everything . . . But in times past the sacrament was so properly used, and the people were taught to understand this fellowship so well, that they even gathered food and material goods in the church, and there—as Saint Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11—distributed among those who were in need. We have a vestige of this practice in the little word ‘collect’ in the mass, which means a general collection just as a common fund is gathered to be given to the poor. Those were the days too when so many people became martyrs and Saints. There were fewer masses, but much strength and blessing resulted from the masses; Christians cared for one another, supported one another, sympathized with one another, bore one another's burdens and affliction. This has all disappeared, and now there remain only the many masses and the many who receive this sacrament without in the least understanding or practicing what it signifies.²⁷

In his same treatise on the Lord's Supper and the care for the needy, he gives his diagnosis for *why* Christians in his day neglected the wellbeing of the downtrodden in their church communities:

There are those, indeed, who would gladly share in the profits but not in the costs. That is, they like to hear that in this sacrament the help, fellowship, and support of all the Saints are promised and given to them. But they are unwilling in their turn to belong also to this fellowship. They will not help the poor, put up with sinners, care for the sorrowing, suffer with the suffering, intercede for others, defend the truth, and at the risk of their own life, property, and honor seek the betterment of the church and of all Christians. They are unwilling because they fear the world. They do not want to have to suffer disfavor, harm, shame, or death, although it is God's will that they be thus driven—for the sake of the truth and of their neighbors—to desire the great grace and strength of this sacrament. They are self-seeking persons, whom this sacrament does not benefit. Just as we could not put up with a citizen who wanted to be helped, protected, and made free by the community, and yet in his turn would do nothing for it nor serve it, no, we on our part must make the evil of others our own, if we desire Christ and his Saints to make our evil their own. Then will the fellowship be complete, and justice be done to the sacrament. For the sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a person that he is made one with all others.²⁸

27. Martin Luther, “Fight, Work, Pray!” trans. Jeremiah J. Schindel (St. Louis: LC-MS, 2004, reprinted in 2019), 11-12.

28. Luther, 12.

In 1523, Luther wrote a constitution of sorts for a “common chest,” so the local parish could have a system in place to take care of its own who were needy along with certain students passing through town.²⁹ Lutheran theologians carried the same desire as Luther to see compassion ministry become a natural part of every congregation.³⁰ Echoing Luther more than three centuries later, Wilhelm Loehe declared,

The highest Shepherd has equipped the office of Word and sacrament, the office of reconciliation, with obligations and authority to mercifully sacrifice oneself for the salvation of the sheep, just as he sacrificed himself for the sheep according to the unfathomable gift that he received. Working alongside the office of the Word is the office of bodily mercy. In Holy Scripture, all offices of the Holy Spirit are called *diakonia*, or ‘service.’³¹

He understood the office of deacon as starting small and growing naturally, as in first helping a widow. Then helping care for the widow’s children. Then practicing hospitality toward the poor or sick pilgrims who visited Jerusalem. And so, “the deacon, full of blessing, walked alongside the bishop and the elders through the congregation and laid down the earthly gift of mercy alongside the heavenly goods of the divine office.”³²

Loehe saw no conflict between gospel and mercy work in the church. He saw them as both flowing from the same place of every Christian’s heart.

If therefore, the church’s constitution as well as its offices can be understood in light of mercy, then this already gives great glory for the Lord of the church. All his officers, his male and female servants, practice either spiritual or material mercy.... Full of love, full of humbleness, full of holy urge, full of fervent mercy—this is, generally speaking, the right way to practice mercy. Regardless of whether it be shown spiritually or bodily, by giving or forgiving, by not judging or judging, by patience and long suffering or by the seeming opposite, a sudden outburst of chastisement, it, nevertheless, remains one and the same in its bountiful practice.³³

29. Martin Luther, “Ordinance of a Common Chest,” trans. Albert T. W. Steinhäuser (St. Louis: LC-MS World Relief and Human Care Series, 2005, reprinted 2019).

30. Wilhelm Loehe, like Luther, holds this up as an example to be followed, that “Christians gave offerings in their Divine Services, which were partly used for the poor, especially for agape meals.... Christians used to deposit special weekly and monthly gifts in the congregation’s charity chest.... Many gave the tithes of the Old Testament voluntarily, and this was publicly approved, yet without making a lot out of it. When greater calamities appeared nearby and far away, collections were announced.” [Wilhelm Loehe, “On Mercy: Volume 2” (St. Louis: LC-MS 2006, reprinted 2019), 13]. He goes on to lament the fact that over time, the work of deacons and deaconesses began to disappear, and that “the distinguishing mark of the Christian era—the care of the poor provided by individuals—is now over. Instead of this, the institutional care of the sick and wretched is all that remains. Since there are no congregations left that are able to provide for the poor, believing it to be something to be done by each and everyone...” (Loehe, “On Mercy: Volume 2,” 28).

31. Wilhelm Loehe, “On Mercy: Volume 1” (St. Louis: LC-MS 2006, reprinted 2019), 28-29.

32. Loehe, 30.

33. Loehe, 32, 35-36.

Such overabundant mercy naturally then flows from the congregation to all people! "... Mercy also was not content to drive every kind of misery out of the closest proximity, out of the area of the individual congregation, but it wanted to do good and help those who lived far off."³⁴

A contemporary of Loehe, Theodore Julius Brohm, was a German Lutheran pastor who emigrated to and served in the United States in the 19th century.³⁵ As he pondered the church's role in compassion, he focused on the church community taking care of its poor, widows, orphans, and ill. He urged congregations not to see them as burdens, but as Christ himself dwelling among them, choosing to clothe himself with the humble and helpless. To assist those in need, he recognized that pastors of small congregations were able to personally oversee the care of the poor. Yet in larger congregations, a more ordered way was required to assist the poor and sick. He wisely noted the difference between the churches of his era in Germany and America. In Germany, "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.... [in Germany] the public institutions of charity benefited from pious organizations [which] earlier centuries had established. [In America] they can only be maintained by the modest gifts of the Lutheran members of the community."³⁶

Going back to the generation of Lutherans after Luther, Martin Chemnitz also wrote about compassion ministry. In his context, he was concerned primarily with writing against the Roman Catholic view that the poor had the duty to remain poor so that the faithful could use them for their alms to earn heaven. He noticed that when that opinion was withdrawn, alms for the poor all but dried up, as the "faithful" lost their motivation to help the less fortunate. He also wrote against the Anabaptists, who mandated that no true Christian should own property, but should share everything "in common" in communities. He drew heavily upon Scripture and the church fathers to show that almsgiving manifested itself *freely* in many ways, from private giving to public common chests in the congregation. That is, a specific form was not *mandated*.³⁷ Regardless, Chemnitz taught almsgiving as necessary, but urged preachers not to make rules about how to collect or distribute them; rather, he encouraged them to let the gospel predominate. "Therefore, alms is said to redeem from death and free from sin because they

34. Loehe, "On Mercy: Volume 2," 8. He goes on to write, "The Lutheran Church has already known for 300 years that deacons and deaconesses are scriptural. One might wonder then why it had neither deacons nor deaconesses. It is probably because the ancient *diakonia* had to appear as a new creation, and every start is so hard. But now it is different, for the start has been made, and the little lamp of the wise virgins is finally burning. He who has lit it wants it to be guarded and fueled. Diligence is to be maintained so that the fire and brightness of the good widows and virgins remain on earth until the Lord comes" (Loehe, "On Mercy: Volume 2," 45).

35. Upon emigrating from Germany, Brohm served as a pastor in New York City for 15 years. Later, he served in St. Louis as a pastor and lecturer on the Old Testament at Concordia Seminary until his retirement.

36. Theodore Julius Brohm, "Mercy and the Lutheran Congregation: A Translation of the Essay 'Intentional Care of the Poor and the Sick is Essential for the Well-Being of a Christian Congregation,'" trans. Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: LC-MS, 2006, reprinted 2019), 11.

37. Centuries later, Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), a prominent German Lutheran theologian and historian, picked up on these specific ideas of Chemnitz: Adolf von Harnack, "Mercy in the Early Church: The Gospel of Love and Charity" (St. Louis: LC-MS World Relief and Human Care Series, 2007, reprinted 2019).

testify to us about faith, just as fruits attest to the goodness of a tree—and by faith we receive the forgiveness of sins and Christ dwells in our hearts, etc.”³⁸

Finally, shortly after Chemnitz, Johann Gerhard, in his work “On the Duties of Ministers of the Church,” writes that the seventh duty of ministers is caring for the poor and visiting the sick.³⁹ He urged pastors to follow Christ’s example in *caring* for the poor and sick. That is, he believed that pastors themselves ought to work with the congregation to collect money or hold public feasts and encourage the distribution of funds to the poor. Even though deacons in the early church and treasurers in his day were charged with much of this work, he wrote, “However, on this account, ministers of the church should not judge that taking care of the poor has nothing to do with them. Rather, with the frequent exploitation of their hearers to exercise generosity toward the poor, by their own example of hospitality, generosity, and by watching over the church treasury, they should support help for the poor.”⁴⁰

Just as our Lutheran forefathers saw the opportunities for compassion work in their day, our brothers and sisters in the faith continue to seize opportunities for the work today. The work of caring for the needy among our congregations and outside of them continues to burn bright in WELS. For example, dozens of congregations and hundreds of individuals have sent goods and funds to our little congregation, Palabra de Vida, offering more items to help the less fortunate than we can even distribute! Furthermore, in my interviews with synodical administrators, pastors, missionaries, and laymen, I heard the theme again and again—let compassion ministry flow! Dan Sims of Christian Aid and Relief said, “Look at [compassion ministry] not just as a way to gain prospects and members, but to show Christ’s love by being kind and compassionate.”⁴¹ Jim Behringer of WELS Special Ministries, noting the difficulty of helping the hurting, encourages us, “We *must* find a way to do [compassion ministry]. Love will find its form.”⁴² Tim Bourman, a pastor in the heart of Queens in New York City, says, “When we love each other, the world will see that. Remember people are whole people—they have bodies too! Not just souls. The church needs to be a whole church—we must have this commitment to each other. Not only do we give you communion, but we will give you a place to stay! We will take care of *all of you*. The pastor’s attitude pushes out into the congregation. They see that, and they do that. They know that WELS is going to help, too, if it’s needed. And it becomes symbiotic.

38. Martin Chemnitz, “On Almsgiving,” trans. Rev. Dr. James A. Kellerman (St. Louis: LC-MS, 2005, reprinted 2019), 26.

39. Johann Gerhard, “On the Duties of Ministers of the Church,” trans. Richard Dinda (St. Louis: LC-MS, 2005, reprinted 2019), 3. Gerhard lays out the seven duties this way: “The most important duty of ministers of the church is to preach the word... the 2nd duty of ministers is to administer the sacraments... the 3rd duty of ministers is diligently praying for the flock entrusted to them... the 4th duty then is the honest control of their life and behavior... the 5th duty of ministers is to administer church discipline... the 6th duty of ministers is to preserve the rituals of the church... The 7th duty of the ministry is the care of the poor and the visitation of the sick. He should collect and spend faithfully the money destined for use for the poor... All told, therefore, there are seven duties of ministers of the church” (Gerhard, “On the Duties,” 2-3). What’s interesting to me, in my mission setting, is that “outreach” and “evangelism” are not listed here but are certainly things that I spend much of my time doing as a pastor.

40. Gerhard, 66-67

41. Daniel Sims, Chairman of Christian Aid and Relief, interview via Zoom with author, June 2, 2022.

42. Jim Behringer, Chairman of Special Ministries, interview via Zoom with author, June 9, 2022.

It's a witness to the world."⁴³ Caleb Free, a pastor in Lakewood Ranch, FL, says, "We don't have to be experts on every area of compassion ministry.... But we should point people in the right direction because we have experts in our church body who can partner with us."⁴⁴

Now, brother, be encouraged! Be freed to let compassion flow in your own life and into and through God's people. Be shrewd when it comes to the pitfalls. Confront your fears with the light of the gospel. Christ laid down his life for you, he became poor so you could be rich, he invited you to share in his burdens, and he promised you a treasure in heaven that can never be destroyed. What a Savior! Keep his goodness in your sights, and through the lens of his gospel see the opportunities—dig into the lives of the hurting, have compassion for them in their real-life issues, and bring them that same gospel message that has saved your life.

2. A VISION FOR COMPASSION MINISTRY IN THE CONGREGATION

This work of digging into lives and having compassion may seem overwhelming. After all, what pastor is itching to do *more*? What council wants to take on *another* project? Should we tack on another area of ministry? Who will do it? What results will it yield? Won't this suck up a lot of time and money and lead to droves of people taking advantage of our kindness?

The first two essays of our symposium showed us convincingly through Scriptural and historical examples that Christ's Church burns brightly in a dark world when it engages in both spiritual *and* bodily compassion ministry. I pray the first section of my essay has warned about pitfalls, spoken to fears, and set before you the opportunity we have as congregations to let mercy flow. Now, we must talk about what compassion ministry can look like in the local parish.

We will consider these questions: First, what *exactly* is compassion ministry? Second, what is compassion ministry's spiritual, organizational, and stage-based flow in a congregation? And third, what are some unexpected blessings of compassion ministry?

What *Exactly* is Compassion Ministry?

Matthew knew who he was. A sinner. A tax-collector. A reject, though rich. And yet, his compassionate Lord called him. He wrote down for us what he observed his Savior doing: "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion (*ἐσπλαγγίσθη*) on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 9:35-36).

43. Bourman, interview via Zoom with author, June 13, 2022.

44. Caleb Free, Pastor of Risen Savior Lutheran Church, Lakewood Ranch, FL, interview via Zoom with author, July 6, 2022.

This is what compassion ministry looks like. The New Testament word for compassion is *splanchnidzomai* (σπλαγχνίζομαι), a verb that involves the inward parts, the center of oneself, being shaken at the sight of the suffering of another.⁴⁵ Jesus came across spiritual, emotional, relational, and physical suffering, and because he was moved with compassion, he responded mercifully by preaching, forgiving sin, restoring lepers to their families, and healing blindness. Some followed him, some didn't. Some were thankful, some weren't. This did not deter him. He preached *and* he healed those in his path, his face resolutely set toward Jerusalem.

We, Christ's Holy Church, "preach to and heal" those in our path. Some will be thankful, some will not. Some will believe, some will not. And yet, Chemnitz posits, "Let us ourselves not pick out those whom we wish to assist, but rather those whom God puts before us on whatever occasion, just as God put the man who had been robbed and beaten in the path of the Samaritan."⁴⁶ If a man is starving, he needs food before he can listen to the message. Jesus healed everyone—even the sick who wouldn't follow him.⁴⁷ The marks of Christ's Church then are certainly the gospel in Word and Sacrament. But the Church truly rooted in the gospel will most certainly carry out compassion ministry as well!⁴⁸

Now, what is the appropriate, compassionate response to one suffering? Are we called to hand \$5 to everyone who asks? Are we obligated to give the church key to a homeless person seeking shelter from the winter winds? We must define the true *problem* and thus the proper *aim* of compassion ministry.

The problem is almost always, in some way, broken relationships. "Poverty is rooted in broken relationships."⁴⁹ Therefore, the aim is reconciliation. We typically think of the problem as material. But lack of things is not the root of the problem. A certain man has come to me more than a few times begging for hundreds of dollars. As a recent immigrant with a girlfriend and small child, his case is strong. One time, after a few days of negotiating, I finally agreed to drive to his apartment and drop off some emergency money. He had said he did not have a ride or access to any dollars. Upon my arrival, he sent his girlfriend down to retrieve the cash. As we chatted, his sister (a member of the church who lives in his apartment building) came outside, said hello to me, got into her car (which presumably wasn't able to transport her brother to the church the previous few days), and drove away to work (where she presumably made money, which she was presumably not sharing with her own brother). My giving him money on a

45. This Greek word is used 12 times in the Gospels. God is a compassionate God. Christ is God with us, Immanuel—he is close (Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection*, 14).

46. Martin Chemnitz, "On Almsgiving," trans. Rev. Dr. James A. Kellerman (St. Louis: LC-MS, 2005, reprinted 2019), 15.

47. We are comfortable preaching law *and* gospel. We teach justification *and* sanctification. So also, faith *and* works, proclamation *and* acts of mercy. One needs the other in each case.

48. This is simply the corporate application of the doctrines of faith and works. Works flow from faith. They are the external evidence of a living faith. Jesus judges churches in Revelation ch.2—3 for their *corporate flavor*. Lord, have mercy, and give us strength!

49. "Poverty is rooted in broken relationships, so the solution to poverty is rooted in the power of Jesus' death and resurrection to put all things into right relationships again. Of course, the full reconciliation of all things will not happen until the final coming of the kingdom, when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Only then will every tear be wiped from our eyes (Rev 21:4)," (Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 73).

repeated basis doesn't fix the problem. The *main* problem to address is reconciling him with his sister.

The problem is *not necessarily material*. Leading expert on poverty Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D., defines poverty as “the extent to which an individual does without resources.”⁵⁰ Those resources are not simply financial, however. She lists eight key resources which must be sufficiently met: financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules. “The ability to leave poverty is much more dependent upon other resources than it is upon financial resources.”⁵¹

Therefore, lack of resources is not the issue, but a symptom. In the United States—apart from sudden catastrophes—a lack of resources is often a symptom of severed relationships, from the community level to the personal level. Therefore, the solution that proper compassion ministry offers is not just money or food. It's multidimensional reconciliation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed that no organization and no person is better equipped to address the full scope of brokenness than the local church and the individual Christian.⁵²

The most experienced psychologist or observer of human nature knows infinitely less of the human heart than the simplest Christian who lives beneath the cross of Jesus. The greatest psychological insight, ability, and experience cannot grasp this one thing: what sin is. Worldly wisdom knows what distress and weakness and failure are, but it does not know the godlessness of men. And so, it also does not know that man is destroyed only by his sin and can be healed only by forgiveness.⁵³

This demonstrates the most foundational relationship severed by sin: our relationship with God. But that is not the only relationship that needs to be reconciled. In their groundbreaking work *When Helping Hurts*, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert propose the idea that we live in relationship with self, others, all creation, and God, through economic, social, religious, and political systems. If we understand first of all that we are *all* broken by sin, and that we *all* rely on God's grace, then we can embark on what compassion ministry is aiming for: “to restore people to a full expression of humanness, to being what God created us all to be, people who glorify God by living in right relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation.”⁵⁴

50. Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D., *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Highlands, TX: Aha! process, Inc., 4th Revised Edition, 2005), 7.

51. Payne, 8.

52. It is perhaps of value to note that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor in Germany in the first half of the 20th century before being executed by the Nazis. While we do not agree with his neo-orthodox view of Scripture, he has some solid insights on this aspect of community.

53. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper One, 1954), 118-119.

54. Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 74.

Compassion ministry is all about relationships. It's about maintaining and restoring community. The church itself is a "community project."⁵⁵ Therefore, the church must obsess about holding her relationships together as the body with Christ as the head.⁵⁶ For this reason, author Cornelius Van Dam believes the deacon is a necessary role in today's church.⁵⁷ A deacon works primarily within the local church to maintain and restore the community aspect of the congregation. "The ultimate outcome is that the Lord's provisions are sufficient to keep the joy of redemption in the fellowship of believers so that people are not burdened by poverty or want of whatever kind. This truth also functions on a large scale, beyond the individual congregation.... There should be no unsatisfied need among His people."⁵⁸ While Van Dam strongly states the result of a deacon's work as a way of making his point, Bonhoeffer makes a similar point in this way: "Only where hands are not too good for deeds of love and mercy in everyday helpfulness can the mouth joyfully and convincingly proclaim the message of God's love and mercy."⁵⁹ And further, he states, "The Christian, however, must bear the burden of a brother.... In bearing with men God maintained fellowship with them."⁶⁰ Luther understood the necessity of keeping the needy connected to the body of believers in his words on the Lord's Supper: "In this sacrament...he is thus united with Christ and his saints and has all things in common [with them], that Christ's sufferings and life are his own, together with the lives and sufferings of all the saints."⁶¹ The current president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod,

55. Paul David Tripp, former pastor and current author and church consultant, puts it this way: "For much of my Christian life and a portion of my ministry, I had no idea that my walk with God was a community project. I had no idea that the Christianity of the New Testament is distinctly relational, from beginning to end.... I now know that I need to commit myself to living in *intentionally intrusive, Christ-centered, grace-driven, redemptive community*" [Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 83-84].

56. The church is unique when it comes to "gifts" and "talents"; in the world, they're "objects of competition." In the church, they're "elements of community, no longer qualities that divide but gifts that unite" (Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection*, 77).

57. Van Dam is not alone. Marshall Segal writes that as the early church "needed men strong and wise enough to help mend fractures in the family," so today we need people in this role as "a stronger and more vibrant force for good, a noble and vital ministry" (Marshall Segal, "The Quiet and Crucial Work of Deacons," *Desiring God*, 3 July 2022. https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-quiet-and-crucial-work-of-deacons?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=paidsocial&utm_campaign=NTP+%E2%80%93US+Boost&hsa_a_cc=1624234290982548&hsa_cam=23849977346490267&hsa_grp=23849977346510267&hsa_ad=23851261266960267&hsa_src=fb&hsa_net=facebook&hsa_ver=3&fbclid=IwAR3BnMRjQsh8-K6XsvAYazQU5oJFTDp8m-4aw428V1cu0k6G5kAOPxIV2Q_aem_AcOs1Plmdo04yLsnruz5eSID7m23yQMj3hREd1JK5ta-X5ACIe9BQNO3ENKgEld0rhuceKf7WtuHk5-d84PrpfGaGGDFIS0uliNlka855nH_AmaAliyW4mHbxGaknvumKfw&fs=e&s=cl)

58. Cornelius Van Dam, *The Deacon: Biblical Foundations for Today's Ministry of Mercy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), 155.

59. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 100.

60. Bonhoeffer, 100.

61. Luther, "Fight, Work, Pray," 6. This work of Luther drives home the connection of those going to the altar with their fellow believers uniting themselves to Christ and one another, even going so far as to say "...we on our part must make the evil of others our own, if we desire Christ and his saints to make our evil their own. Then will the fellowship be complete, and justice be done to the sacrament For the sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a person that he is made one with all others" (Luther, "Fight, Work, Pray," 12).

Matthew Harrison, writes that “we dare not miss the fact that love and mercy toward the needy mark the church’s corporate life. If not, it risks denial of the very Gospel and sacraments that constitute it.”⁶² Compassion ministry is all about relationships. In the church, it’s all about keeping the family of believers together, around the Word and sacraments.⁶³

So, this is *what* our churches are approaching in compassion ministry: the ministry of meeting needs for relational reconciliation to self, God, others, and creation. This, naturally, takes time, discernment, and effort—and more of each if multiple relationships are fractured in the life of a person.

In the congregation, then, we must understand it to be imperative to care for the entire person. If a person is mired in sin, going through a divorce, suffering from imprisonment, dealing with deafness, or needing funds to cover an expensive surgery, they run the danger of being cut off from the community of believers. Our opportunity is to keep them established in their family in Christ and their connection to the gospel. Outside the congregation, as our love flows into our community, we will find people needing even *greater* layers of reconciliation. Compassion is about relationships, relationships, relationships: “Charity that does not enhance trusting relationships may not be charity at all.”⁶⁴

We are not attempting or expecting to abolish sin’s results from the world. The world groans until the Day. Yet, we strive to help! Alongside our Lord, we long to restore a believer into the fellowship and to reconcile an unbeliever with their Savior. We strive to provide unshakable hope to suffering sinners in this vale of tears. This is what compassion ministry is.

What is Compassion Ministry’s *Spiritual* Flow in a Congregation?

Rather than placing “compassion ministry” into another bucket of ministry, I believe it is more helpful to see compassion ministry as part of the *flow* of a congregation.

That said, there are three general areas of *flow* when it comes to what compassion ministry could look like. The following, then, serves as a “vision” of compassion ministry in the local church. First is the spiritual flow: our source of compassion, and how that compassion flows through us to others. The second flow is organizational: the one who does it, who it’s for, and what its scope is. The third flow is stage-based compassion: this helps us work through how to help in as effective a way as possible.

62. Harrison, “The Church is a Mercy Place!”, 2.

63. Consider also what our brothers in the ministry share about what compassion ministry is. Dan Sims says it’s a “fifth commandment ministry” (Daniel Sims, Chairman of Christian Aid and Relief, interview via Zoom with author, June 2, 2022). Jim Behringer notes compassion ministry is simply “serving one another with love both as individual Christians and as a congregation” (Jim Behringer, Chairman of Special Ministries, interview via Zoom with author, June 9, 2022). Keith Free, former Board for Home Missions administrator says that “Gospel ministry meets spiritual, and compassion ministry meets physical and mental, etc. needs” (Keith Free, former Administrator of Board for Home Missions, interview via Zoom with author, June 9, 2022). Mike Duncan, who works in various places in Southeast Asia, says, “It’s Christ’s love in action” (Mike Duncan, Coordinator in SE Asia, interview via phone with author, June 16, 2022).

64. Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 51.

First is the spiritual flow. Matthew Harrison writes, “Lutheran theology without mercy renders the confession of the faith a clanging cymbal. Mercy without the mooring of a solid confession, and rooted in the church’s life of worship, quickly loses its Christian character.”⁶⁵ Working in a city with many agencies trying to provide services to an underserved community, I have witnessed how quickly “compassion work” apart from the gospel becomes perverted. True compassion has one point of origin. It *can only flow* from the tender heart of our Father through his Son into the broken world; it flows through the Holy Spirit’s means of grace into broken hearts; it flows through sinner-saint hearts regularly connected to those means of grace into the lives of those closest to them; it then overflows into the greater, broken community and world around them.⁶⁶

This spiritual flow of Christian compassion is unique in the world. It simply flows in one direction from a heart connected to God in worship.⁶⁷ Consider just how set apart the Christian is for this spiritual flow of compassion.

Already in Old Testament times, *racham* (רָחַם), the word for mercy which exclusively modifies Yahweh, sets him apart from Ancient Near Eastern deities. “Every human act of *racham* in the Old Testament is derived from Yahweh. He is the source of all mercy. The beliefs of Israel’s neighbors in Canaan, Mesopotamia, and Egypt show no such understanding of their deities.”⁶⁸ And yet, throughout history, when thought systems and manmade religions *do* address

65. Norman Nagel, “The Twelve and the Seven in Acts 6 and the Needy.” Preface by Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: LC-MS, 2005, reprinted 2019), preface.

66. “Wherever the church would have a ‘mission’ or endeavor that is not clearly flowing from, to and connected with altar, font, and pulpit, that mission is sectarian at best, and non-Christian at its worst” [Matt Harrison, “The Church’s Role of Mercy in the Community” (St. Louis: LC-MS, 2004, reprinted 2019), 4].

67. “The Christian has a two-fold calling, or vocation, both of which involve our living outside of ourselves. The first is the call to live in God through faith in Christ. That comes through the gospel in one of its forms, baptism, evangelism, the word about Christ, etc. The second is the call to live in the neighbor through love. That comes from, it *flows* out from, the gospel. In the first call, our good works are *nothing*. In the second, they are *everything*” (Jacob A. O. Preus III, “The Vocation,” 8).

68. Lessing, “Mercy in the Old Testament,” 2. And so, “to value people is to value Yahweh. Yahweh places infinite value on each person [being created in his image], even if he or she is outcast and disenfranchised” (Lessing, “Mercy in the Old Testament,” 3).

compassion or empathy, they deride it, limit it, or wield it as a self-serving tool.⁶⁹ Any love or compassion borne of the *opinion legis* and not of God can only end there.⁷⁰

The Christian, conversely, shows love because God is love, and his limitless fountain of love flows into the Christian and through the Christian through his means of grace. True compassion *must flow* from Compassion itself, our compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, who offered his Son's precious blood while we were still sinners.

Luther realized that the means of grace working in repentant hearts leads to acts of compassion flowing one way. As mentioned, he noted that the "collect" part of the mass was originally a "collection" of funds to be given to the poor and that the Church before him made sure to provide for the needs of all. The spiritual flow is a natural result of hearts that daily and weekly receive the message of a merciful and loving God who gave up all riches to be with his

69. This is the curse of anything that is borne of the *opinio legis*. For example, in Islam, alms (*zakat*) is "a major instrument in attracting the mercy of Allah... The truth is that *zakat* is a strong means, now and hereafter, of procuring the boundless compassion of Allah" (Omer Faruk Senturk, *Charity in Islam: A Comprehensive Guide to Zakat* (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2018), 47, 49. According to more atheistic religions, such as Darwinism, empathy developed in the human species as a function of promulgation: by "feeling the pain" of another while watching them grab a sharp object, the astute human learned to not grab that sharp object, thus ensuring they would not die [Helen Riess, MD with Liz Neporent, *The Empathy Effect: 7 Neuroscience-based keys for transforming the Way we Live, Love, Work, and Connect Across Differences* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2018), 19]. This self-serving attitude carries into the Old Adam's motivation for compassion. Motivational writer David de Steno admits, "If compassion only helped us inhibit poor treatment of others, I'd probably not be spending much time on it in this book. But like gratitude and pride, that's not the case. What ties these three emotions together is that their ability to make us willing to sacrifice to aid others can be coopted to help our future selves" [David De Steno, *Emotional Success: The Power of Gratitude, Compassion, and Pride* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 101]. In his interview with Brett McKay of the "Art of Manliness" podcast, Eric Barker puts it this way: "This is how we get around the evolutionary trouble of friendship: if I believe that you are me and I am you, I will do good things for you. This is how empathy works on a biological level" (Brett McKay, "Podcast#808: The Surprising Science Behind Building Stronger Relationships," *The Art of Manliness*, 6 June 2022. <https://www.artofmanliness.com/people/relationships/plays-well-with-others-podcast/>). In Buddhism, compassion is not something a person does to earn a good spot with a deity, but it's something that can spring from within someone essentially for self-improvement. The Dalai Lama wrote, "If you keep practicing with great determination, then your mind will gradually change; it will improve. This perspective will serve as a solid foundation for developing all-encompassing compassion" [His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *How to be Compassionate: A Handbook for Creating Inner Peace and a Happier World* (New York: Atria Books, A division of Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2011), 106]. However, cut off from its source, neither another god nor one's heart can produce the sort of compassion that would dare to bandage the wounds of one's enemies.

70. "Human love is directed to the other person for his own sake, spiritual love loves him for Christ's sake. Therefore, human love seeks direct contact with the other person; it loves him not as a free person but as one whom it binds to itself. It wants to gain, to capture by every means; it uses force. It desires to be irresistible, to rule. Human love has little regard for truth. It makes the truth relative, since nothing, not even the truth, must come between it and the beloved person. Human love desires the other person, his company, his answering love, but it does not serve him. On the contrary, it continues to desire even when it seems to be serving. There are two marks, both of which are one and the same thing, that manifest the difference between spiritual and human love: human love cannot tolerate the dissolution of a fellowship that has become false for the sake of genuine fellowship, and human love cannot love an enemy, that is, one who seriously and stubbornly resists it. Both spring from the same source: human love is by its very nature desire—desire for human community. So long as it can satisfy this desire in some way, it will not give it up, even for the sake of the truth, even for the sake of genuine love for others. But where it can no longer expect its desire to be fulfilled, there it stops short—namely, in the face of an enemy. There it turns into hatred, contempt, and calumny" (Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 34).⁷⁰

people. In addition to flowing from the pulpit, compassion also flows from the altar. Luther noted this act uniquely brings all believers to one place, into fellowship as one loaf, and so we become bread for one another. “Thus, I am your food, just as you make use of bread when you are hungry that in turn your body may help and give strength to the one who was hungry. Therefore, when I help and serve you in all need, I am your bread.”⁷¹

Therefore, people who practice true compassion ministry individually or corporately must be connected to means of grace ministry. Christ-like compassion can only flow from the gospel rightly preached and administered. Through a vibrant gospel ministry, a vibrant ministry of compassion can and will flow through church and community, messy though such work may be.⁷²

What is Compassion Ministry’s *Organizational* Flow in a Congregation?

The second flow of compassion ministry is organizational. Once believers are plugged into the means of grace, and their hearts yearn to show acts of compassion, the following questions naturally arise: What will we do? Who will do it? Who will receive it? Do we start a program? Is it all on Pastor?

I believe compassion ministry starts with the pastor, though it could start through another center of influence in the congregation. What’s important to note is that compassion is *not* just a program, it’s a culture. It’s not just a handed-out sandwich, it’s a value. So, if a pastor wants his flock to be compassionate, he must *be* compassionate with them and others. Carey Nieuwhof, in a recent article on church culture, wrote this: “As a leader, you need to embody the things you want your organization to embody.”⁷³ So, before trying to *organize* compassion, *be* compassionate. This is the most natural way to create organizational flow.⁷⁴

As the pastor treats his people with compassion, as he suffers with the suffering, as he reaches out to the sick, the orphan, and the widow, as he reconciles the straying back into the fold, as he demonstrates with actions a compassionate heart, he can bring others along into that. He can employ a few others to help him call the straying, visit the sick, make meals for the one who cannot, or get gas money to the one who can’t make it to church. He can make “compassion” a seen value among the people.

71. Martin Luther, “All Become One Cake: A Sermon on the Lord’s Supper,” trans. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: LC-MS, 2005, reprinted 2019), 11.

72. Sin will always hinder us from the perfect administration of God’s perfect compassion, and sin will always create more opportunities that require compassion than one can humanly bear. Back to the cross, we fly!

73. Nieuwhof, Carey, “A 5 Step Guide on How to Create an Amazing Church Culture,” CareyNieuwhof.com, May 2, 2022. https://careynieuwhof.com/guide-on-how-to-create-an-amazing-church-culture/?he=kolander.ryan%40gmail.com&el=email&utm_source=ActiveCampaign&utm_medium=email&utm_content=A%2B5-step%2Bguide%2Bon%2Bhow%2Bto%2Bcreate%2Ban%2Bamazing%2Bchurch%2Bculture&utm_campaign=5%2BF1%2B-%2B5%2BSteps%2Bto%2Ba%2BBetter%2BChurch%2BCulture.

74. Here, the temptation for a pastor may be to point to his Clifton Strengths results and say, “Look, compassion isn’t in my top 5.” It’s not in mine, either. So, it may take extra effort and lots of practice to be compassionate even as the spiritual flow is a daily and weekly occurrence.

In a smaller congregation, the organizational flow might stay this informal—from pastor to people, from people to people. However, in a larger congregation, the organizational flow must become more complex. In the early church, this became the primary work of the deacons. They were not less than the elders but different in their vocation. Both worked for the reconciliation of people to one another and their God. Elders primarily carried out this mission through the preaching and teaching ministry, and deacons primarily through the physical and relational ministry. Both were needed to keep the peace, to unify the body of believers, and to keep Christ as their head. Perhaps such a position, paid or volunteer, with a standing committee or *ad hoc* teams, would be needed in a mid-size or larger congregation. Whether with the title of “deacon” or something else, those who *serve* in such a position can greatly bolster the work of the church. “A strong diaconate is a great blessing to the church, for not only does it show Christ’s love and compassion in practical and tangible ways, but it also frees the elders [or pastors] to concentrate on the task of shepherding and spiritual oversight in the service of the head of the church. Where possible the elders [or pastors] and the deacons are to cooperate with each other for the well-being of the flock (Philippians 2:3-5).”⁷⁵

At Palabra de Vida, we added “love” as one of our five core areas of ministry, alongside “worship, learning, outreach, and working together.” The goal of adding this area was and is to keep us focused on “compassion” as a value *and* as something we *do* together. By God’s grace, though in no perfect way, loving each other and our community has begun to become part of the *zeitgeist*, or as my Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters say, the *cultura*, of the saints.

As stated, the organizational flow of compassion ministry starts with the pastor or another accepted leader in the church. It begins as a value, as a culture, and it “finds its forms” naturally.⁷⁶ As a congregation grows, and as more people need active compassion in their lives, more structure will be needed, such as another diaconal position with their own team. This diaconal ministry becomes organizationally vital to prevent people from slipping through the backdoor when difficulties arise in their life, about which the pastor was unaware and therefore perhaps was perceived to be unwilling to help.

As this ministry develops, and the pastor, deacons, and people work to care for the needs of the brothers and sisters, it will spill into the community at large. Depending on how the church is integrated into its community, this will take different forms. Perhaps it will flow to natural connections, such as the relatives or friends of its members. Perhaps it will flow outside the church to strangers in the community whom outreach uncovers, and who have pressing needs.

Compassion ministry is needed in suburbs as much as in urban centers. As more city centers see rent rates skyrocket and jobs decrease, poor people and immigrants are moving into the suburbs. “Hence, many suburban churches now find themselves on the front lines of America’s war on poverty without even realizing it.”⁷⁷ Even in affluent areas, mental health and loneliness are being reported as “epidemics.” If you search online, you will find countless studies

75. Van Dam, *The Deacon*, 149.

76. Behringer, interview via Zoom with author, June 9, 2022.

77. Corbett and Finkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 169-170.

showing this to be true in the 21st century. No matter where a church is located, it may decide to intentionally organize itself to carry out compassion. The church's gospel message and its compassion work together for multidimensional relationship reconciliation in today's hurting world.

What is Compassion Ministry's *Stage-based* Flow in a Congregation?

This brings us to the stage-based flow. As Christians are connected to God's marvelous compassion through Word and Sacrament and as they are organized around a culture of compassion as set by the pastor and leaders, they may clamor to reach out, perhaps more and more. The suggestions might fly in, "Pastor, we should start a soup kitchen." "Pastor, we should donate backpacks." "Pastor, we should send blankets to this country over here." There is far more to say than there is room in this paper on this topic, but this third "stage-based" flow equips us to help *without* overly hurting the helper or the receiver. Understanding the stage-based flow is vital to compassion ministry.

In one of my first weeks in Detroit, I was introduced to long-time community organizer, Dennis Nordmoe. A devout Christian, he had dedicated the better part of his adult life to trying to improve the quality of life in Southwest Detroit. Armed with a Ph.D. in philosophy, a Christian faith, and a wealth of knowledge in how communities work, he looked me in the eye and said: "Don't do what that other church in our neighborhood is doing." He pointed in the direction of a local church that had run a feeding program for years. "That program is hurting this neighborhood. It's keeping people poor."⁷⁸ As community health expert Robert Lupton writes, "Giving to those in need what they could be gaining from their own initiative may well be the kindest way to destroy people."⁷⁹ Or as former homeless person and criminal turned Christian pastor Mez McConnell says, "Few things are sadder in the world than seeing a regular at a soup kitchen. It is a travesty. Very often, the people are not being moved on to dignified self-sufficiency; they are not being really helped."⁸⁰

To channel the compassion flowing inside our congregations and out into our communities in an impactful way, we must distinguish between types of poverty and suffering. That is, there are different "stages," both for individuals and for larger groups of people. The book *When Helping Hurts* lays out these three distinct stages: crisis stage, rehabilitation stage,

78. Nordmoe, Dennis, Founder of Urban Neighborhood Initiatives in Southwest Detroit, interview in person with author, May 31, 2022. He verified this six-year-old quote with me when we sat down for this wonderfully insightful interview.

79. Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 4.

80. McConnell and McKinley, *Church In Hard Places*, 178. Robert Lupton notes that doing things like delivering presents to a poor family's home can completely "emasculate" the father, as it gives his children the idea that their dad can't provide for them, but "the good stuff comes from rich people out there and it's free" (Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 33).

and development stage. By discerning what stage an individual or a community is in, the Christian or church can start to channel the flow of compassion appropriately.⁸¹

For example, a soup kitchen that gives out two meals a day to people who are fleeing a war-torn country is appropriate relief. However, a soup kitchen that gives out two meals a day in the same neighborhood for two decades, serving the same people repeatedly, is applying “crisis” relief to a group that should be in its “developing” stage.⁸² Of course, it may be *easier* to apply crisis-style relief. Giving out meals, handing out clothes, giving away presents and money—these things are less messy. They do not require us to do the hard work of building relationships or of reconciling people to one another and their God.

Mark Henrich, a pastor in the heart of an immigrant community in Toronto, notes that to uncover what stage an individual or a community is in, humility and listening are vital.⁸³ Professor Allen Sorum notes the same thing with respect to our work in urban areas: “The first lesson God will have an urban worker learn, I believe, is humility.”⁸⁴ As we listen with humility, we will start to notice what stage a community or a person is in, and what may be needed to improve their situation. This is how compassion ministry can *improve* a person or a community, rather than applying proverbial band-aids again and again.⁸⁵ *Improving* a person may not involve handing a bowl of soup to the same person day after day. Instead, a Christian can go to their home with two bowls of soup to build a relationship *and* meet a present need. “That way ... you’ll give him a lunch, but he’ll have to eat it with you!”⁸⁶

As we encounter hurting people, we must do the difficult work of getting into their life, of forming relationships. Otherwise, they run the risk of remaining lost here and of being lost eternally. In the third part of this essay, I will briefly focus on practical ways to align the community stage, needs, and resources necessary to do compassion work. But before we get there, let us bask in a few of the unexpected ways God has blessed compassion ministry efforts.

81. The “how” to discern will be addressed later on in this paper. But for now, two things: (1) relationship building and (2) listening.

82. Lupton suggests these principles are useful as one works to apply help in a developing stage: (1) don’t subsidize poverty; (2) reinforce productive work; (3) create producers, not beggars; (4) invest in self-sufficiency. “For disadvantaged people to flourish into their full God-given potential, they must leave behind dependencies that impede their growth. Initiatives [aimed at] development... must be restructured to reinforce self-sufficiency if they are to become agents of lasting and positive change” (Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 102).

83. Mark Henrich, Pastor of Hope Lutheran Church, Toronto, interview via Zoom with author, June 21, 2022.

84. E. Allen Sorum, “Bringing the Gospel to North American Cities” (WLS Essay File, 1995), 11. <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/3806/SorumCities12.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

85. Jason Paltzer: “[Compassion ministry] is part and parcel of seeking the lost and improving who we are. It’s part of the arc of ministry.” Jason Paltzer, Coordinator of Wisconsin Lutheran College and Kingdom Workers training initiative, interview via Zoom, June 23, 2022. Jason is an excellent resource for anyone hoping to start an organized compassion ministry alongside or from within their congregation. He is creating curricula in conjunction with Kingdom Workers and Wisconsin Lutheran College for church leaders who are looking to deepen their knowledge and create plans to engage their communities through compassion ministries.

86. McConnell and McKinley, *Church In Hard Places*, 181.

What are Some Unexpected Blessings of Compassion Ministry?

In a country that carries a five-year prison sentence for Christians who dare proselytize, one of our WELS missionaries witnessed 521 adult baptisms in 2021. In another country where another WELS missionary works in a refugee camp where Muslims destroyed the meager house church of newly baptized Christians and continue to harass them, the local imams are willing to consider allowing the building of an openly Christian school. In still a third country where Christians are the absolute lowest caste, a missionary remembers the conversation between a Christian doctor and his Muslim patient. “I know you worship the true God,” said the patient. The doctor asked, “Why?” The gentleman responded, “I see his love in you.”⁸⁷ These are only some of the fruits of Christian compassion in some of the world’s most anti-Christian places.

God does not guarantee these kinds of blessings to all who show compassion to their neighbor or to every church that lets compassion flow into its community. The Son of God was hated, and we can expect the same disdain. And yet, by grace, our marvelous Lord *does* so often provide blessings beyond understanding as we shrewdly and actively engage in the lives of others through acts of mercy and compassion.⁸⁸ If apologetics can disarm a hard, reasoning mind, compassion can disarm a hard, stubborn heart.⁸⁹ Nonetheless, God does not guarantee outward blessings *as a result* of compassion ministry.

Furthermore, we don’t engage in compassion ministry *as a means* to get results or blessings. I remember hearing the advice that the *reason* Christians should forge relationships and do good to others is to build a “bridge to the gospel.” I understand the genuineness behind this sentiment. I have practiced compassion ministry with this phrase in mind. Yet, in my talking with others, and in growing through my own experience and learning, I am becoming convinced that this might not be the right way to frame our motivation. Perhaps a better framework for the “why” can be understood by Jesus’ simple words: “If you love me, keep my commands” (John 14:15). Dr. Glen Thompson noted this in his essay for this year’s Symposium as well, that Christians who practiced compassion ministry throughout history did so not as an outreach *strategy*, per se, but they loved their neighbor in extraordinary ways because that’s what Christians do.⁹⁰ They understood God’s call to be compassionate (Eph 4:32), to love the brothers

87. For the sake of their safety and so they might be able to continue their work, I’ve chosen not to include their names or when I spoke with them.

88. Consider our first two WLS Symposium 2022 essays by Drs. Wessel and Thompson!

89. In fact, the Christian showing compassion is uniquely equipped to disarm the hard heart. Consider what Oswald Bayer writes: “Mercy (*Barmherzigkeit*) means having a soft heart and is the opposite of hard-heartedness (*Hartherzigkeit*); hard-heartedness means closing myself off to the hardships and needs of the next person, thereby forgetting my own needs and my own privation. Four features constitute mercy’s gentle movement, showing clearly its anti-Stoic bearing: Mercy is affective; mercy stoops down; mercy lives outside itself; mercy seeks solidarity with the next person” [Oswald Bayer, “Mercy from the Heart,” trans. Jonathan Mumme (St. Louis: LC-MS World Relief and Human Care Series, 2005, reprinted 2019), 8].

90. Jim Behringer, in his breakout presentation at the WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership in 2020 in Chicago, made this same point: Compassion ministry was *not* an early Christian outreach strategy. Rather, it was a core Christian value. Using it as a way to lure people is manipulation—people see through that. (Jim Behringer. “Compassion Ministry as Outreach.” Presented at the Lutheran Leadership Conference, January 21 -23, 2020, Chicago. https://vimeo.com/394474047?embedded=true&source=video_title&owner=74306189).

and sisters so others know whose they are (John 13:35), to be shrewd (Matt 10:16), and to be gospel-proclaimers (Matt 28:18). Some missionaries I've learned a lot from have an ability not to dichotomize their life of compassionate service from their life of shameless proclamation.

And so, while God doesn't promise outward blessings *as a result* of compassion work, and while the Christian and the church do not use compassion *as a means* to get results, God can and does bring about unexpected blessings through our compassionate encounters with others. Consider the following stories and experiences of a few Christians to see how God has blessed such work.

Bill Meier tells a story of a WELS church that was struggling. The new pastor arrived and was then told they only had enough money to pay him a couple more times. He said to his church, "Let's commit to praying and to serving anyone in any circumstance with any need within a 10-mile radius. Let's say sorry to God for everything. Send us people and we will serve them." Soon, the new pastor got a phone call from a group home. They asked him, "Could you come? We need help giving a Bible study to someone with disabilities." He went, and word quickly spread. Soon, a network of places started calling him—they wanted to get more folks with disabilities in their circles to be able to participate in the church. So, he held a "worship at the cross" service at his church. From this point on, visitors started coming to his church—not because ten new people came with disabilities each month, but because people heard that this is the church that serves people with disabilities. Over the years, the church filled up with people from all walks of life. The congregation that was once a few Sundays away from not being able to pay its pastor now submits a CMO and has built and operates a school in an area where Kingdom Workers operates.⁹¹

Jim Behringer reflects on a congregation he served which had 400 members. They retained members well, which he credits in large part to their compassionate approach to ministry. He reflects, "If you tend to a person in their crisis, they will not forget that." For example, for weeks, every week, the chairman of his church called someone who cheated on her husband. She eventually came back, repented, and was restored into the family of believers.⁹²

Additionally, compassion ministry gives permission and opportunity to more members to engage their gifts in the ministry of the church. It mobilizes the gifts of more people. Behringer notes this can happen by the pastor asking his people, "Who can sit next to a blind person in worship?" Mark Henrich, serving a diverse congregation in Toronto, puts it this way: "[Compassion ministry] brings out people's joy in giving, where you can see how truly generous they are. Offerings might be tough, but if there's a special need, people respond. It gives them a chance to grow in giving, and joy in giving and helping."⁹³

It also increases the desire of the members to invite others along to experience their church—"We love all people and we take care of them." Lucas Bitter notes it gives members a

91. Bill Meier, CEO of Kingdom Workers, interview via Zoom with author, June 2, 2022.

92. Jim Behringer, interview via Zoom with author, June 9, 2022.

93. Mark Henrich, Pastor of Hope Lutheran Church, Toronto, interview via Zoom with author, June 21, 2022.

way to talk about their faith with others and even to engage non-members in compassion projects alongside them!⁹⁴

Mike Duncan and Lucas Bitter both talk about how compassion work undoes the common lies and misconceptions about Christians here and around the world. Through the news or the culture, some may come to think Christians and churches are bigoted or unintelligent or mean, or too political. But when Christians are working in difficult places in the community without asking anything in return, the watching world might respond, “I guess they’re not as bad as I thought.”⁹⁵

Another blessing that might result is that compassion encounters create a point of interaction with the community. It turns the eyes of the ministry from inward to outward. It gets Christians into the lives of people who might *never* step foot in a church. Keith Free has seen this happen in home missions—as a church gets deeper and deeper into its community with acts of compassion, it can almost become contagious in that community, and spur on conversations about Jesus along with invitations to worship and study.⁹⁶ Jason Paltzer, as he’s worked between missions and community health organizations, has seen how community partnerships can develop, and how the church can become needed and respected—even by those who don’t share the same faith. Church members must become a part of their community before they can ask members of their community to become a part of the church. Matthew Harrison writes, “The Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms grants broad freedom for the church to engage and be active in its community. The church has a role in its community (local, national, international) by virtue of the fact that congregations and national churches are actually ‘corporate citizens’ of their respective communities.”⁹⁷ And as the church intentionally becomes a “corporate citizen” of its community, people will interact with the Christians that comprise the church.⁹⁸

A very similar blessing to that outward shift is what Paltzer calls the creation of “spaces of objectivity.” What he means is that by going “offsite,” Christians can create spaces where they can talk about spirituality with people who may never otherwise come into a worship or Bible study setting. Harris, a WELS missionary, engages his community (which is extremely hostile toward Christians) with unflinching acts of “no-strings-attached” compassion.⁹⁹ In this way, he’s

94. Lucas Bitter, Pastor of Intown Lutheran Church, Atlanta, interview via Zoom with author, June 24, 2022.

95. Mike Duncan, interview via phone with author, June 16, 2022.

96. Keith Free, interview via Zoom with author, June 9, 2022.

97. Matthew C. Harrison, “Theology for Mercy” (St. Louis: LC-MS World Relief and Human Care Series, 2004, reprinted 2019), 7. Harrison writes in another essay that this “corporate citizen” concept does not go against the Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXVIII (on Ecclesiastical Power), by comparing a church that helps renew its community or meet a need to a Christian citizen who attends church on Sunday and votes later that week [Matthew C. Harrison, “Theological Reflections on Confessional Lutheran Involvement in Neighborhood Renewal: An Exercise in Two-Kingdom Theology” (St. Louis: LC-MS World Relief and Human Care Series, 2006, reprinted 2019), 18]. “By participating in neighborhood renewal, a Lutheran parish is merely serving God in the kingdom of the left. In reality, this is little different from a parish keeping proper legal records, filing wage records with the government, adhering to legalities having to do with property, fire codes, fencing, building codes, etc.” (Harrison, “Theological Reflections,” 18).

98. Paltzer, interview with author via Zoom, June 23, 2022.

99. Harris is not his real name, for security reasons.

even gained entry into mosques to openly discuss the Christian faith and to bring in pastors to speak to imams and their congregations about the gospel. Rather than coming across as proselytizing, compassion ministry works to create that common space—“We’re all people in this community—and here’s what I believe.” In Lucas Bitter’s experience, this “created common space” blessing is how he’s won people’s trust so they will listen to the gospel.

Behringer notes compassion ministry in the church gives people a fuller understanding of their vocations as church members and neighbors. Members see the practice of their faith as something that goes beyond singing and ushering once a month. It goes into *being* a neighbor. Keith Free agrees—compassion isn’t just something we practice in a formal way, but also in our vocations.¹⁰⁰

Paltzer points out the potential blessing of serving people holistically. It creates the foundation for the spiritual, but also the emotional, physical and mental. It engages people as God created them and as they thus experience the world. He notes that young people are looking for this. In his experience and research, young Christians *want* to help and serve their neighbor. Churches can give them opportunities to do so.

Paul Biedenbender, pastor of a bilingual, multicultural congregation in the middle of Denver, CO, says compassion ministry has placed his church on the radar of people in their community. It helps foster relationships with individuals and other organizations, businesses, and schools, creating a positive image in the community. Thus, compassion ministry can lead others to give glory to God and it gets the word out about a good church that loves people. Perhaps sooner or later, many of those people will be searching for meaning and might turn to you for spiritual guidance.¹⁰¹

I’ve also witnessed God’s blessings in our small congregation. Being in a cross-cultural setting, I can do nothing before I earn trust. One way I’ve earned trust is through working to listen to people’s needs and trying to meet those needs, both by personally helping and by organizing our church into action. One family stopped in last summer, asking if they could do a Quinceañera for their daughter at our church.¹⁰² We chatted for around an hour, and before they left, I asked how they heard about our church. The father said, “Well, our friend goes here now and again, but really, the whole community is talking about this church, that you’re the church to come to because you help people.”

In summary, God often provides a myriad of blessings through our compassion ministry. It gives the opportunity to more of God’s people to use their gifts in service. It helps those members work together to carry out Christ’s work. It helps keep church members close to their family of believers. It turns the church *outward*, and the congregation *outside of* itself. It gets the church into the community, making connections with more people who need truth, love, and community. It creates spaces of objectivity, neutral forums where faith can be openly discussed

100. K. Free, interview via Zoom with author, June 9, 2022.

101. Paul Biedenbender, Pastor of Christ Lutheran Church, Denver, interview with author via Zoom, June 29, 2022. Lucas Bitter made this point in his interview too. (Bitter, interview via Zoom with author, June 24, 2022).

102. A Quinceañera is a coming-of-age celebration for a young, Hispanic woman when she turns 15. There is a church service celebration followed by a dinner and ceremony.

with many people. It gives Christians a fuller understanding of their vocations. It leads Christians to invite others to participate alongside them. It undoes common misconceptions about Christians being mean or ignorant. It fosters a good image for God and his church in the community, both among the helped and among the casual observers.

Many of these benefits are evidenced in Scripture and the history of the church. The church often *thrives*—though this “thriving” at times involves suffering—when it models itself after Christ. We bear with one another patiently and rejoice with one another. We preach the kingdom *and* heal the sick. Our job is not to change society—no utopian dream has ever been able to overcome the disastrous effects of sin.¹⁰³ Rather, the work of God’s people is to bring the gospel *and* to strive to remove distractions to the joy the gospel brings through acts of compassion, reconciling them with self, others, creation, and God.

3. CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF COMPASSION IN A CONGREGATION

Finally, a few nuts and bolts. If you want to continue to strengthen your church’s compassionate heart both inside the church and toward the community or work to change the culture of your congregation, what follows are some practical steps. This section is not meant to be an equation that spits out a perfect compassion ministry or culture. That is not possible. Nor is this section intended to be long or complex. Each congregation will require specialized care and cultivation. What follows is meant to give ideas for churches that wish to move into a flowing and active ministry of compassion in small or large ways.

Step One: Get Started

Pastor, compassion starts with you. So, before cultivating compassion in the congregation, the pastor cultivates his heart with his compassionate God’s gospel. “[The pastor’s] heart needs to be tenderized day after day by his communion with Christ so that he becomes a tender, loving, patient, forgiving, encouraging, and giving servant leader.”¹⁰⁴ Then, be freed to mess up! Mistakes are a good thing and are to be expected. The perfectionist pastor can paralyze himself into a cyclone of ideas and no action. A pastor can show his community he cares by being willing to look silly, not having a polished answer or program. “But we see him out there!”

103. Reed Lessing lists these three dangers as pertain to compassion ministry: “As the church heeds Amos’ call to channel Yahweh’s justice and righteousness into the world, dangers are at least threefold: (1) expect too much and offer the world a false hope; (2) deny the true mission, the proclamation of the gospel and administration of the sacraments; and/or (3) simplistically apply biblical texts to complex issues. However, ‘the Lutheran vision leads to a non-utopian view of history that is not cynical’” (Lessing, “Mercy in the Old Testament,” 17).

104. Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 63.

Be freed to get started, pastor! Jason Paltzer gives pastors this encouragement: “Be engaged in the community. Ask [questions about the community to] a grocery store clerk or someone at the car wash. This cultivates that [desire] in myself. Once I believe it and internalize it, it flows. It’s hard to motivate people to do things unless you *actually believe* it will help, that it’s a big deal!”¹⁰⁵

The simplest place to start is by talking to people in the church and the community. Ask them what they like about their church or community. What are they good at? What do they believe about their future? How can the pastor work with them to achieve that?

Getting started is as simple (and as challenging) as starting a personal compassion ministry. Keep it off the church calendar and ministry plan. Own it until you personally believe it’s a necessary thing. Larry Schlomer, the administrator of WELS World Missions, sees this as the place to start too: “I think that’s the way the Lord wants us to look at this world. If we do that individual work first, then we can do corporate mercy work.”

I am a natural introvert. Over the years, I’ve been forced into uncomfortable and awkward conversations and I have failed in compassionate work more often than I care to admit. So, I empathize—for many this is not comfortable—same here! Set aside an hour each day to text or call people. Set a goal to engage one new person a week on Saturday mornings. Biedenbender points out you have to get to know people to start to understand what they need or are looking for: “Get out and find out. Listen with a compassionate heart to identify an area of special need and effort.”¹⁰⁶ By identifying needs, you’ll be able to engage the church and community in compassion work. Let’s be ok with being uncomfortable, let this be part of our challenge, for the sake of the gospel and our neighbor.¹⁰⁷

Step Two: Find an Ally

Once the pastor personally encounters people with needs, inside and outside the fellowship of believers, and is moved to do something about it, he can move on to step two: find an ally. Ideally, the ally would come from within the church. As mentioned before, a deacon-type role would be perfect for this. However, to begin, identify one person with gifts for compassion, service, and follow-through. On the other hand, the pastor might find an ally in the community. Jim Behringer points this out: “Meet people in the community who are resourced for different things.”¹⁰⁸ Rather than asking, “How can I help you?” in conversations with others in the church and community, ask, “What are you good at?” This approach, applied over time and

105. Paltzer, interview with author via Zoom, June 23, 2022.

106. Biedenbender, interview with author via Zoom, June 29, 2022.

107. I find Rev. Matt Harrison’s words here applicable to “step one”: “I have never felt more intensely the honor and privilege to serve Christ and his people than when I stood before his Saints to give his gifts on Sunday, and then ventured out during the week as a representative of Zion, and of Christ and of confessional Lutheranism, to make a difference in that one community, opening doors for the gospel, bringing light to darkness and order to chaos, that the gospel might flourish” (Harrison, “Theological Reflections,” 25).

108. Behringer, interview via Zoom with author, June 9, 2022.

across conversations, in both the congregation and the community, can potentially flip the culture from “Serve me” to “Let me serve with you.” It can foster excitement and uncover allies.

Caleb Free suggests working to discover allies by simply raising awareness about the resources our Synod has and the compassion work our Synod does. “Do a Special Ministries Bible study, with one area per week. [Or] ... do a Special Ministries Sunday.”¹⁰⁹ Part of cultivating the culture and finding allies is simply letting people know these are ways to serve in the kingdom and helping them to step up one at a time.

Dan Sims and Jim Behringer note that the number one way to cultivate and encourage an ally to step up is through preaching. Plant practical ideas of how to carry out compassion ministry in personal and corporate ways. Sims notes, “Preach the gospel to cultivate. But the new man needs to be guided.... Keep instilling in the people the goal of reaching out to love their neighbor. Give opportunities to help corporately or individually.”¹¹⁰

Finally, alongside general inquiries and specific preaching and teaching, once the pastor locates a specific way the church could serve their people and the community, the pastor might consider directly approaching someone with gifts and ask them to serve as an ally in that capacity. Write out your idea to present to them, showing the big picture of how this compassion work fits into the overall flow of the gospel ministry. Ask the ally to work alongside you as you go out, or actively engage and serve. Show and tell. Get them excited. Cultivate an ally.

Step Three: Try Something

I remember one Sunday during my first year at Palabra de Vida when I preached my polished sermon to two people. I remember another Sunday that year when five small family units worshipped, went to the basement to eat a fellowship meal, and proceeded to sit so far apart from each other in the basement that they couldn’t have heard each other if they yelled. That’s not what a fellowship meal is supposed to look like. I remember thinking, “I have no idea what to do, but I have to do something.”

As I tried to brainstorm ideas, I got a phone call from some generous church members in Michigan. They wanted to donate clothes to us. I thought, “Great, this could be our way into the community!” So, I set up the clothes in the church basement, spent \$60 to make lawn signs announcing a clothing drive on Saturday, and sat in the basement waiting for fresh, new prospects for our church to come streaming in. That day, a total of two homeless men came by with black garbage bags to fill up with clothes they certainly didn’t need and certainly couldn’t lug around forever. I had messed up by skipping steps one and two and jumping to three. Furthermore, my spiritual, organizational, and stage-based flows were all off (or non-existent).

Try something once you understand the flows, once you’ve listened to people in and outside the church, and once you have an ally, a champion. Then, the something the pastor tries will be aimed at actual and not perceived needs, the pastor will not burn himself out, and the

109. C. Free, interview via Zoom with author, July 6, 2022.

110. Sims, interview via Zoom with author, June 2, 2022.

congregation and even the community can work at a small, organized project. Lord-willing, some of the above-mentioned blessings might even result from your efforts.

For example, after listening to the community, you might realize that instead of receiving presents at Christmas, they might be in desperate need of an afterschool program.¹¹¹ But rather than launch an entire program, try something near and small, matching the gifts of allies with the needs in the community and the ministry of the church. Consider trying just two events that year, geared toward building relationships with youth and families. Or, if you find that rather than a soup kitchen, your wealthy community needs mental health resources, consider holding a one-time counseling workshop. Promote it. Just one thing that year. Maybe it will flop, but maybe it will start something.

The bottom line is to *try* something *near* and *small*.¹¹² Try something at an individual level, working with an ally, engaging the congregation, and employing the gifts and resources of the community. As you go, you will gradually uncover needs in the community—which most often involve relational issues rather than material ones—and will get ideas for something to try.

Step Four: Develop and Execute a Plan for Ongoing Compassion Ministry

Let's say the following has happened: compassion has become part of the culture of the congregation; allies have arisen, and more are asking to serve the overall ministry of the gospel; the number of people engaged by the pastor and congregation has grown and requires more help in being reconciled to self, others, creation, and God. Once these things are a reality, the church might consider developing and executing a planned, ongoing form of compassion work.

Here, I will not say much, other than to suggest this: a pastor and his ally can tap into our wealth of resources in WELS to discover exactly what to do within the means and overall ministry of the congregation. This will involve planning, research, and conversations within the church and community. Consider using a tool such as “asset-based community development” or “participatory learning and action” as a part of this planning process.¹¹³ These tools are relationship-based and are focused on engaging the gifts of the community, rather than creating a dependency relationship.¹¹⁴ The tools provide a guide to start and manage an effective compassion ministry as a church in a community without overwhelming resources, to fit such a

111. Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 136.

112. Reference the third fear and encouragement under the subheading “Fears: Why Carrying Out Compassion Ministry Makes Us Queasy” above.

113. See Appendix 1 for a 2.5-page summary of Jason Paltzer’s “Church-based Community Health/Wellbeing Strategy Process.” This could serve as a good starting place for a congregation that’s ready for “step four.” This is the strategy recommended by Corbett and Fikkert as well (*When Helping Hurts*, 120). While Corbett and Fikkert see the long-term engagement with the community as necessary, they caution short-term mission (STM) groups to “go as learners” and not as “saviors” (Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 164).

114. Robert Lupton notes that most communities need and want three things—safety, good schools, and economic viability. These could be areas to explore as a church asks questions and finds assets in its community (Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 134).

ministry within the scope of the church's mission, and to keep the flow of the gospel from pulpit and altar to hearts at the forefront of the mission.¹¹⁵

The benefits of churches developing and executing a plan are multilayered.¹¹⁶ The congregation will keep the reconciliation aspect of compassion work at the forefront, rather than giving away gift cards apart from relationships with the suffering.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, dollars will be purposefully budgeted for specific work, and the ministry plan will reflect how compassion ministry fits the natural flow of the gospel ministry of the church. More purposeful recruitment of volunteers may result, and deeper engagement and trust may be built in the community.

COMPASSION MINISTRY: A WONDERFUL THING

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Col 3:12). Friends in Christ, as Paul encourages us, “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal 6:10). The gospel fills us to the brim with our Lord’s overflowing compassion as we unleash it upon others around us—“we love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). He has freed us to carry out this work. He has suffered with us. He has encouraged us by uniting himself with us. Why make the topic more complicated than this? Compassion ministry takes you into a dangerous world, but we have this opportunity to be little Christs in a world that needs him—and you, his church.¹¹⁸

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115. See Appendix 2 for a list of men I interviewed who are doing this work in the local parish, and who would be willing to serve as resources to get you started, along with a list of three books for those hoping to start an organized compassion ministry.

116. Reference the section under the subheading “What are Some Unexpected Blessings of Compassion Ministry?”

117. “At some point in the valuation process, emotion and reason are likely to find each other. We can’t save the whole world. No ministry can effectively serve across the entire spectrum of human need. To *effectively* impact a life, relationships must be forged, trust built, accountability established” (Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 182).

118. Thank you to all who helped me with this paper, especially to my wife, congregation, and community, to my father, to my Men Like Flint, to the other two essayists and the WLS Symposium committee for their communication throughout the process, to my mentors, to my advisor who helped guide me, and to those who shared their insights via interviews.

APPENDIX 1. STRATEGY PROCESS

Church-Based Community Health/Wellbeing Strategy Process
(Jason Paltzer, emailed this document to me on June 23, 2022)

Community health focuses on building up wellbeing in a defined neighborhood leveraging the available resources and assets that allow for internal control. It recognizes the benefit of external support through clinical care, social systems, economics, and policy but is balanced by the local resources directly in the hands of the local community members and structures. The process outlined below is a way for a local church to engage the community in ways that are aligned with the church's mission of helping people see, know, and live in the joy of their Savior. *Asset-based community development* and *participatory learning and action* are two guiding principles that give priority to relationships.

1. Exploratory community health assessment
 - a. Participatory community map development (church and community leaders)
 - b. Check county public health, social service data/reports, and mission data (e.g. Insights)
2. Interview community health providers, organizations, leaders
 - a. Create a contact list of key public health and healthcare leaders, librarians, physicians, social workers, educators, nurses, Christian businessmen/women, dentists,
 - b. Create an interview guide to understand current and emerging health issues
3. Identify a church/community champion that serves as a liaison between the church and the neighborhood of focus. Form a church-community coalition to create a participatory system and hold each partner accountable.
4. Take an inventory of key congregational assets and resources and document these resources
 - a. People
 - b. Experiences
 - c. Passions
 - d. Careers/education
 - e. Strengths
5. Conduct additional church-community participatory learning and listening workshops to test assumptions and identify root causes
 - a. Professional seminars/workshops
 - b. Problem tree analysis
 - c. Wholistic Worldview Analysis
6. Identify next steps within the church's mission strategy and ministry areas for the community health initiative for long-term sustainability.

- a. Completely integrated
 - b. Part of an existing ministry
 - c. New ministry area
7. Develop an integrated church-community vision for key partnerships
 - a. Integrate community-church strengths around a defined focus and opportunity
 - b. Cast vision for the congregation on being a holistic community health congregation
 8. Identify a church-based framework for measuring community engagement activities and effectiveness
 - a. Members involved
 - b. Community members engaged (talked to, met with, invited, serving)
 - c. Criteria for selecting a target neighborhood (current presence, key assets, attitudes)
 - d. Health indicators

Community Mapping Workshop Guidelines

Community mapping is an opportunity for members of the church and community to come together and collectively tell their story of where they live. The value of this exercise is that it results in a physical representation of diverse perspectives of the community or neighborhood. The story includes everything they “see” in their community and paints the picture of a survival strategy used to navigate the various opportunities and challenges that may come. The community map is important to highlight areas of livelihood (assets), connection, navigating uncertainties, and identifying problems. The mapping exercise can be done from a current perspective and a preferred future perspective of what people would like to see in their community 5 years down the road. This helps to paint a vision of what might be possible. The map forms a foundation for subsequent participatory exercises leading to identifying initial priorities, key relationships to build or strengthen, and plans to implement alongside members of the community. Questions to ask during the mapping exercise include:

1. What are the physical boundaries of the area that is of primary concern? (Boundaries can be roads, natural structures like rivers/mountains, zip codes, etc.)
2. What are sources of social capital and networking in this community? (Religious institutions, community centers, evening hangouts, etc.)
3. What are significant sources of physical capital in this community? (Businesses, physical safety – police/EMS/Firefighters, manufacturing, agriculture, technology, water, residential and business areas, etc.)
4. What are the main types of transportation for getting people in and out of our community and key routes? (Public transportation, vehicle maintenance of vehicles, etc.)
5. What are sources of health capital (or hindrances to health) in our community? (Grocery stores/convenience stores, physical activity areas, parks, meetup points, local clinics,

dentists, community health navigator access, fast food corners, clean water fill-ups sites, bars/taverns, liquor stores, smoke shops, etc.)

6. What are opportunities for learning and knowledge? (Schools, continuing education, adult learning centers, community colleges, libraries, etc.)
7. What are sources of financial capital? (Banks, loan companies, utility payment sites, job placement, career mentoring/advising, etc.)
8. What are other key infrastructure assets in our community? (Recovery groups, mental health/memory loss support, etc.)
9. Who are key community leaders in our community and where they live, work, connect with the community?
10. What are other major assets in this community that we rely on for daily life?

After the map is constructed, the group can analyze the map by asking:

1. What are significant areas of strength?
2. What are significant gaps?
3. What are untapped opportunities?
4. What might be potential areas of concern in the future?

The map allows the group to identify key beliefs, behaviors, and assumptions about the community. It allows the church to identify potential community leaders, collaborators, and partners in the community that it did not see before.

APPENDIX 2. RESOURCES

List of people interviewed: resources to help pastors develop a compassion ministry

- Dan Sims, chairman of WELS Christian Aid and Relief
- Bill Meier, CEO of WELS Kingdom Workers
- Jim Behringer, chairman of Special Ministries (area of Congregational Services)
- Jason Paltzer, coordinator of Wisconsin Lutheran College and WELS Kingdom Workers program, advanced degree work in community health and years of mission experience

Pastors and laypeople interviewed who are or have been engaged in compassion work

- Caleb Free
- Paul Biedenbender
- Larry Schlomer
- Paul Nitz
- Tim Bourman
- Lucas Bitter
- Mark Henrich
- Mike Duncan
- Keith Free
- Dennis Nordmoe

Three Books to Get Started

Corbett, Steve and Brian Fikkert. *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012.

Lupton, Robert D. *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)*. New York: Harper One, 2011.

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