

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 3

H. ETHICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

One loving God: two hands – saving and caring A statement on the theology and practice of Lutheran Community Care Australia

Edited by Rev Dr Victor C Pfitzner for CTICR April 2003.

1. THE MANDATE FOR MERCY

- 1.1 The God who is revealed in the Old Testament is a God who saves out of mercy. The Mosaic Law expects that the Israelites who have been rescued from slavery in Egypt will in turn show mercy to all who are in need: the poor and homeless, unprotected people like widows and orphans, all victims of injustice, those who cannot defend themselves. To come to the rescue of people in need and to advocate for them is a sign of belonging to God's people who have received mercy. To deny mercy is to place oneself outside of God's mercy. See Exo 23:1–9; 34:6,7; Deut 10:18.
- 1.2 Because they were once aliens in Egypt, the Israelites are expected to show mercy also to strangers or foreigners who live among them. The law of Moses repeatedly insists that these outsiders be treated kindly and their rights protected. Strangers who are poor are to be shown the same compassion as the Hebrew poor. God's people are not free to choose those to whom they will show compassion. Animals, too, are to be shown due care. See Exo 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:33,34; Deut 10:18,19; 24:19,20.
- 1.3 The Old Testament prophets repeatedly condemn those who exploit the needy instead of coming to their rescue. They speak hard words against the powerful and the rich who revel in injustice. The lack of mercy and justice in Israel eventually becomes a sign of its total unfaithfulness to God and a reason for God's judgment on the nation in the form of foreign occupation and exile. See Isa 3:14,15; Jer 5:26–28; Hos 6:6; Amos 8:1–7.
- 1.4 Jesus of Nazareth teaches his disciples that to show mercy on those in need is to reflect the very nature of the heavenly Father. So, 'Blessed are the merciful.' It is natural to show special care to one's relatives, friends and fellow-believers, but true compassion reaches out to anyone who is in need. It asks no questions and expects

nothing in return. It requires no means test and crosses all ethnic, social and religious barriers. See Luke 6:36; Matt 5:7; Gal 6:10; Luke 10:29–37.

- 1.5 Jesus not only teaches the kingdom of God's gracious rule. He also acts out the merciful claim of God on all people as he heals the sick, casts out demons, sides with those who are excluded or marginalised, and eats with outcasts. His is an inclusive ministry of mercy. He includes all who are in need and addresses all their needs: spiritual, material and physical. The standard cry of the needy in Jesus' presence is: 'Lord, have mercy!' and he never fails to respond in compassion. He expects his followers to show equal compassion. See Matt 4:23–25; 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30; 25:31–40.
- 1.6 The Christian church is the fellowship of all who believe in Jesus as God's crucified and raised Messiah and who see in him the long-awaited final sign of God's mercy on sinful humanity. Christians continually experience God's mercy in being forgiven and renewed for a life of service to others. The church exists not only to care for its members but also for the world. It exists to spread the good news of God's mercy in Jesus Christ through its proclamation and witness as well as through its acts of love and mercy. See Luke 1:50,54,58,72,78; Eph 2:4,5; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:3,4.
- 1.7 Following Jesus' teaching, writers of the New Testament repeatedly show that religious profession is without meaning if unaccompanied by acts of love and mercy. So the earliest believers shared their possessions and looked after their own needy, including widows and orphans. They appointed deacons to supervise this ministry of mercy. Mutual care and hospitality among Christians were especially important in the age of persecution, when believers were imprisoned and their property was confiscated. Yet believers were expected to 'do good to all people'. See Matt 9:13; 12:7; James 1:27; Acts 2:44; 4:32; 6:1–4; Heb 10:32–34; Gal 6:10; 1 John 3:17; Rom 12:6–8.
- 1.8 The apostle Paul spent much time and effort collecting money for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. But every local assembly of Christians took up collections in worship to meet the needs of the poor. The early church could take up the challenge of extending its charity to the wider community once the threat of persecution was gone. So the church has a long tradition of serving the needy through direct gifts and through establishing institutions like hospitals and orphanages, and through its monasteries. In former centuries where no social services existed, the needy were often totally dependent on the church. Martin Luther also urged local Christian communities to set up 'God's chest' (*Gotteskasten*) out of which material help could be given to the poor and needy. See 2 Cor 8, 9.
- 1.9 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 were 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. See James 2:26; Gal 5:6b.
- 1.10 The triune God rules over all our entire world and entire universe but in doing so operates in two different ways. Lutherans speak of the *kingdom of the right hand*, the kingdom of grace or the realm of the church where God operates through the means of grace, through word and sacrament. We speak also of the *kingdom of the left hand*, the kingdom of law that is the realm of the state. On the one hand, the two kingdoms or ways in which God operates in this world have different purposes,

carry out different functions and operate in different spheres and with different kinds of power. For this reason they need to be distinguished.

- 1.11 On the other hand, the kingdoms are connected and related to each other since God is the one ruler in both kingdoms. Though dealing with the world in different ways— with two different hands—there is one loving and caring God. A holistic approach to care ministry honours God as it points to the fullness of his own glory and of the life he offers to all, as well as reflecting the nature of Christ's own ministry. Programs of Christian care grow out of the right hand work of God in the church, but they exist in the world in partnership with governments and other charitable organisations.
- 1.12 It is important to stress that also non-Christians participate in God's ministry of mercy. The Lutheran teaching on vocation reminds us that we are all 'masks' of God, God's agents in the world as we function as parents, people in government, citizens, workers, carers, entertainers or whatever. God runs the world through us; we are God's hands. In this we are asked to act justly and for the good of all. Non-Christians who have compassionate hearts can participate in the church's ministry of mercy as much as non-Christians can be recipients of its care.
- 1.13 Our affluent and materialistic Australian society creates its own needy who are easily forgotten in the rush for wealth and the good life. Every human being has value by virtue of being made in and reflecting the image of God the Creator. Meeting human need requires no justification, for to be compassionate is to be truly human. Christians know this because they know Jesus Christ, God's mercy in human form.
- 1.14 The church's ministry to all people must be holistic. To minister only to the spiritual needs of people or to seek to save their souls only, is to deny the created unity of the human person and to fail to draw conclusions from the reality of the incarnation of Christ and his ministry in human history. It is to deny the importance of the body in God's plan, from its creation to its resurrection. Spiritual needs cannot be divorced from physical, psychological and material needs. What is spiritual is not immaterial. See Rom 12:1; 1 Cor 6:15,19; 15:42–49.
- 1.15 The church's ministry of mercy is truly Christian if it is inspired, motivated and empowered by the mercy of God in Christ, is inclusive, asks for nothing in return but the joy of serving those in need, and thus brings glory to God who is the source of all 'grace, mercy and truth'. God calls the church to bring good news to the poor, to stand in solidarity with them, to give a voice to the voiceless, and to pursue liberation for those who are oppressed. Like its Lord, the church ministers to the poor and needy. See 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4; 2 John 3; Luke 4:18,19.

2. THE MINISTRY OF MERCY—COMMUNAL AND INDIVIDUAL

- 2.1 The church's provision of care flows from its ministry of word and sacrament. Communal worship is the fundamental source from which Christian charity flows. The gospel announces God's mercy in Christ on the whole of humanity and calls all believers to practice mercy. The sacraments of baptism and the eucharist further enact that mercy. The post-communion thanksgiving prayer expresses the close connection between faith and love when it asks 'almighty God to strengthen us through this healing gift, in faith toward him and in love toward one another'.
- 2.2. By showing love and support to those in need, through acts of caring, we make incarnate God's message of love in Christ. Such activity is to be seen as having its own integrity, as being a legitimate end in itself in the sense that it is offered

graciously and unconditionally, that is, without strings attached or ulterior motives. It is offered simply because the neighbour is in need of the service and support.

- 2.3. Christians continue to live in the 'kingdom of the left hand', that is, in the world here God orders life according to laws of nature, reason, natural law, and coercion. Clearly, most expressions of Christian care will come from individual Christians in their daily lives, as their faith is active in love while carrying out the specific duties of their various vocations. While the individual's ministry of mercy is carried out within the structures of society, it remains otherwise unstructured, responding to human need as it arises.
- 2.4. Christ's ministry serves as pattern for the Christian's life of service that grows out of love in response to God's love in Christ. It includes evangelism and welfare. Christians are called to use their God-given gifts to provide evangelistic witness and service. Since these are both legitimate ways of showing love and care, having their own integrity and purpose, they should be seen as complementing each other, not as standing in competition or isolation.

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