

HISTORY OF COMPASSION

A Heritage of Caring By Paul Thigpen

When the Christian faith exploded onto the international scene in the first century A.D., the pagan culture it invaded was often startled by the heroic efforts of the churches to serve their local communities. Churches quickly established generous traditions of caring for the needy, both in their midst and beyond. Early on, deacons were set apart to care for “the daily distribution of food” to widows and others (Acts 6:1-3). Each congregation had a treasury for relief of the poor, and special efforts, such as famine relief, were made in times of crisis (see Acts 11:28-30, Gal. 2:10).

Among the needy who were specially targeted for assistance by the early church were widows, orphans, the sick and the elderly. Those who died penniless were provided with a decent burial. Many ancient pagans practiced infanticide by abandoning unwanted babies, so the church rescued such children and gave them homes. Exiles and travelers received gracious hospitality. Prisoners were visited and comforted, especially those who were condemned – often for political or religious reasons – to the inhumane conditions of labor in the imperial mines. At times, relief was brought to such prisoners from a distance of hundreds of miles.

Church leaders thundered from their pulpits against the injustices of their day: excessive taxes and the harsh methods employed to collect them, the oppression of tenants by landowners, extortion by usurers, enslavement of freemen, cruelty to slaves, favoritism in the courts and the tyranny of public officials. Even before Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under the emperor Constantine, influential Christians were active in the political arena, offering new standards of justice and helping to shape legislation introducing moral reforms, such as a more humane treatment of slaves. Constantine himself abolished the cruel gladiatorial

sports, which had forced slaves and prisoners to fight brutally to the death while bloodthirsty crowds cheered. The church demanded and eventually received other kinds of civil legislation as well: the privilege of Sunday rest for all people, even slaves; the abolition of the right of life and death that fathers had possessed over their children; and the right of the churches to serve as a place of asylum for those who were pursued by the authorities.

By the end of the 5th century, the church in nearly every city administered diaconia, or ministry houses for the poor, and xenodochia, institutions that were originally intended for the care of travelers but soon took on the combined tasks of a hospital, hotel, almshouse and asylum. Monasteries sprang up throughout the empire, which provided surrounding communities with evangelism, poverty relief, education, vocational training, hospitals and refugee shelters for those displaced by war. The 6th-century collapse of the Roman Empire in the West left the church as the only institution extensive enough and sufficiently well organized to take its place in maintaining social welfare programs, relief services, public works and even peace negotiations with the invaders.

THE MIDDLE AGES

Throughout the Middle Ages in Europe, the primary burden for Christian outreach to the larger community shifted from churches to the monasteries. In addition, new religious orders emerged, each with a special mission: some were evangelists; some were teachers; some were given to medical care or alms for the poor. New “brotherhoods” or “sisterhoods,” as they were called, and even military orders emerged as Christian associations for maintaining hospitals, orphanages and leper houses.

One medieval brotherhood provided burials and maintained cemeteries for indigents. Another specialized in building bridges and roads, erecting inns for travelers who were poor or sick and protecting merchants and other wayfarers against robbers on the highway. Yet another Christian organization collected funds to ransom prisoners and slaves held by the Muslims in the East – some Christians went so far as to offer themselves as slaves in exchange for captives! Perhaps the greatest gifts of the medieval church to the wider community were schools that soon became some of the finest universities in the world.

AMERICAN MINISTRIES

Let's make a giant leap forward in time to the immigration of Christians to the Western Hemisphere. The establishment of the first orphanage in the English colonies by the revivalist George Whitefield was a sign of things to come. The fruit of several spiritual revivals known as the "Great Awakenings" included an intense refocusing of concern on the larger community.

Out of these revivals emerged countless interdenominational "voluntary societies," whose activities included efforts to care for the needy, call for justice and reform the morals of society. Stirred up by the preaching of social activists such as the revivalist Charles Finney, Christians lobbied successfully for the abolition of slavery, suffrage for women and the reform of mental health institutions and unjust labor practices. They worked hard to extend religious education throughout their communities by establishing Sunday schools and distributing Bibles and religious tracts. They fought the spread of alcoholism and provided Christian fellowship and healthy recreation for lonely young people moving to the cities, who might otherwise have been seduced by gamblers, prostitutes and bartenders. They cared for the growing ranks of the poor in urban centers where floods of immigrants often arrived with hardly a penny to their name. And they established hospitals, asylums, orphanages, homeless shelters and soup kitchens that still serve millions today.

Christians today have thus received from their spiritual forebears a rich tradition of outreach ministries. In each generation, those who took seriously Jesus' command to "love your neighbor as yourself" have gone looking for new ways to care for their communities, establishing a host of Christian institutions that have displayed remarkable vitality and longevity. When the last page of history is written, what will be said about our generation's contribution to this wonderful heritage of service?

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Just think what bridges we could build if we truly followed the example of the New Testament Church. We would go beyond being seeker sensitive, to a new frontier of being community-admired. We would be known, not just by the corner we inhabit, but by the city with which we interact. And people would be drawn to God, not because of the weekly show in our churches, but by the irrefutable lifestyles we incarnate.

-ROBERT LEWIS, THE CHURCH OF IRRESISTIBLE INFLUENCE, P.48

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