

A Reaction to Rev. Ryan Kolander's
Cultivating a Culture of Compassion: The Opportunity is Ours

As Peter, James, and John extended to Paul the right hand of fellowship in Jerusalem, they asked him to remember the poor. Paul said this was “the very thing I had been eager to do all along” (Gal 2:10). Compassion ministry goes back to the very beginning of the New Testament church. Compassion ministry was a part of godly living in Old Testament Israel too.

Our essayist has not only asked us to remember the poor, he has told us the *why*, the *what*, and the *how* of doing it. His essay is the fruit of real experience, of extensive reading, and of personal interviews with others who are involved in compassion ministry. Pastor Kolander has made us aware of the blessings and challenges of this blessed calling, and he has spoken to us with honesty (“I gave him the church.” “You will get burned!” “Compassion means ‘suffering with!’” “There is no life hack!”), with passion (“Be encouraged! Be shrewd! Be freed! Confront your fears with the light of the gospel!”), and with humility (“I am no expert.” “I have not done compassion ministry well.”)

Pastor Kolander has given us much to think about, pray about, and put into practice. We heartily thank him for his research and for the paper he has presented to us today.

Three big points stand out for me:

- We proclaim the gospel in word and in action. We preach it and we demonstrate it. The ministry of bodily compassion goes hand in hand with the ministry of gospel proclamation. We might diminish compassion ministry when we call it “a bridge to the gospel,” making it a means to an end.
- Compassion ministry is not so much *something to do*, as it is *something to be*. Compassion ministry is our opportunity (and duty) to be little Christs—Christians—in a sinful and broken world.
- Poverty is rooted in broken relationships—with God, with self, with others, with creation. The individual Christian and local gatherings of Christians are uniquely equipped, by God himself, to address such brokenness.

Permit a quick review of the paper, before I offer possible topics for our discussion.

Part One: Pitfalls, Fears, and Opportunities (pages 3-15)

The essayist warned us about two *pitfalls*, two ditches to avoid: on the one side, the social gospel, an emphasis on Christian love while neglecting the proclamation of God’s truth; and on the other side, an emphasis on the proclamation of God’s truth while neglecting love for neighbor. The essayist identified and addressed four kinds of *fear* in regard to compassion ministry: missiological fears, resource fears, know-how fears, and the fear of getting burned again. The essayist then shared stories of our Lutheran forefathers, from Luther to the present, seeing and seizing the *opportunities* for Christian compassion in their congregations.

Part Two: A vision for Compassion Ministry in the Congregation (pages 15-30)

The essayist defined compassion ministry as efforts to bring people “relational reconciliation to self, God, others, and creation.” He described the spiritual flow, the organizational flow, and the stage-based flow of compassion ministry. The spiritual flow is the mercy and compassion of God flowing to believers who show mercy and compassion to others. The organizational flow is from one person (usually the pastor) to other leaders to the members of the congregation. The *zeitgeist*, the *cultura* is cultivated, and it “finds its forms” naturally. Compassion ministry is stage-based; it takes into the consideration the needs of the recipients. There is a progression from crisis stage to rehabilitation stage to development stage. We develop relationships with people. We serve them and listen to them. They grow, and we grow. Before going on to part three, the essayist catalogued ten “unexpected blessings” of compassion ministry. He provided real and inspiring examples from home and world missions.

Part Three: Cultivating a Culture of Compassion in the Congregation (pages 30-34)
Concise, clear, and concrete, this final section of the essay provided a four-step plan for the development of compassion ministry in a congregation: first the pastor, then with an ally, then try something as a congregation, then develop and carry out ongoing compassion ministry. Our beloved church body has resources (people and materials) to share. The essayist reminded us that the benefits are many, and he concluded with his theme: “The opportunity to love as the LORD loved us is ours.” To God be the glory!

Possible Questions:

1. The essayist shared stories of success and failure. Do the participants have brief stories to share?
2. How do we cultivate a culture of compassion among our seminary students?
3. Is compassion ministry a spiritual gift that some have more than others?
4. Are there benefits of compassion ministry that didn't make the essayist's list?
5. Is there wisdom in instituting a more intentional diaconal ministry in our congregations, as the essayist suggests?
6. How many WELS congregations have ongoing compassion ministry? How long might it take to go from step 1 to step 4?
7. Do the quotes on pages 11 and 12 suggest that we add a compassion ministry component to our teaching and practice of the Lord's Supper?
8. Footnote 39 lists Gerhard's “seven duties of a minister.” Is this list helpful for us today? How does evangelism/missions fit in?
9. Is it possible that “bridge to the gospel” is a helpful term that keeps us from falling into the pitfall of social gospel?
10. Besides the “three to get started,” which other books/resources are highly recommended (by the essayist or by participants)?
11. How well does it work to use community resources in compassion ministry? Are there pitfalls to avoid with this strategy?
12. Of Lupton's three community needs in footnote 114, good schools seem to be in our WELS wheelhouse. Are our Lutheran schools a form of compassion ministry? What about the other two—safety and economic viability? Are there examples of compassion ministry which address these?