



# GUMKA

## How do we spell compassionate care?

by James Dimitroff

**D**uring the last several months the Western world's economy has hit rock bottom. Canadians are concerned about coping with financial threats that undercut our security. But even as we may struggle this year with higher debt or dropping house value, economic hardship is sadly a fact of life for billions of the world's impoverished peoples. Believers in Christ are acutely aware of human needs—not from a secular point of view. We are motivated rather by the Gospel imperative for showing mercy towards our neighbours in dire straits.

You likely wonder why I used the word *GUMKA* in the title. It is the Russian acronym for *gumanitarnaya pomoshch*, or, in English: humanitarian aid. During my seven-year mission assignment in post-Soviet Russia, the term *gumka* came up often. *Gumka* also became part of my personal struggle with how much relief we can justifiably offer to the needy, while simultaneously proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. Can there be a limit to material aid? If so, how can that limit be defended Biblically?

In the Russian mission, sadly, we found that the allure of Western aid could distract people from the pure Gospel message. Rival church groups accused our Lutheran mission workers of “bribing” new Christian converts with the promise of money or foodstuffs. In the complicated arena of missiology (the formal theory of modern mission work in a Christian context and responses to it from people groups), the sharpest warning is for ministry workers to avoid creating dependency. Even as we initiated Lutheran ministry in Russia, the home office in St. Louis urged the creation of an adequate “exit strategy” to preclude the danger of fostering a financially dependent church plant. The watchword was: Dependency could undercut or compromise authentic mission outreach.

The historical reality eventually dictated that we physically separate in a different building the *gumka* supplies from our mission office. Social needs in Russia were so great at the time and human nature so flawed, that

people would often say anything to receive humanitarian aid. At times, their openness to the Gospel sadly became secondary to the limited material relief the mission offered. This reality might have contradicted our goal of bringing the truth of Christ to a land where it was systematically forbidden for more than 74 years.

Many Christians today receive frequent e-mails advocating for relief from horrendous social ills. These examples recently came across my desk. (I note these not to belittle them, but rather to show the difficulty in choosing a valid response.)

October 16 was *World Food Day*. The text begins **Help us now!** You can act now to end world hunger! Join the fast for World Food Day! If you go online, it seems many Christians across Canada would hold a fast from food that day. The website invited churchgoers to join in the fast “to confront the global food crisis and to pray, repent and discern what God would have us to do to address the underlying causes.” Money saved from individual fasting could then be directed to hunger relief projects worldwide.

October 17 was the *International Day for the Eradication of Poverty*. This advocacy group consists of “a broad international network of churches and Christian organizations cooperating in advocacy on global trade, HIV and AIDS.”

October 19 carried the name “Micah Sunday.” This marked an event initiated by Micah Challenge, (website of the same name). This last group is officially heralded as “a global campaign to mobilize churches and Christians to engage with global poverty issues.”

Added to these October dates, we believers in Christ naturally remember the other natural disasters of the past few months—the hurricanes, in particular, that brought such devastation to Haiti, Nicaragua, and other Caribbean nations, let alone the Galveston area of Texas. We have prayed for God's compassionate hand to bring relief and support to those stricken by flood, epidemic and famine.

Many of our congregations generously donate funds to help ease the burden of natural calamity among the survivors.

As we think about human catastrophes, we want our response to display genuine Christian mercy that brings effective material aid to survivors. But also, we desire to proclaim the Gospel message of Christ's love for all people, especially those who suffer exceptional hardship from sudden natural disasters. What is the responsibility of believers in Christ to come to the rescue of disaster survivors? Is there a Gospel mandate? If so, how do we best answer that call from Our Lord?

An example of God-given opportunity to initiate Christian mercy came to LCC quite unexpectedly after Hurricane Mitch struck Central America in 1998. In the aftermath of Mitch, LCC was informed of widespread human need that could be provided most efficiently by then LCC missionary Pastor Sandor Arguello. He both brought together spiritual ministry and material relief to help the hurricane victims. Ultimately, out of unexpected disaster, God brought the benefit of a daughter synod, Iglesia Luterana Sínodo de Nicaragua, that officially formed in 2008.

But what about ongoing social justices as opposed to emergency relief efforts? The record in Holy Scripture may at first seem puzzling. Jesus healed the souls of sinners before He extended material well-being. Some may remember the incident when a woman (Mary at Bethany) anointed Jesus' head with expensive perfume (Mt. 26: 6-13). The disciples' immediate response, we read, was prickly "indignation" because they perceived the "waste" of a precious oil on Jesus. Just look, they huffed, this rare perfume could have been sold for a large sum and [the proceeds] "given to the poor." Mark's gospel (Mark 14:3-9) even estimated the perfume was worth 300 *denarii* —almost a year's wages in that era. John's account (John 12:1-8) identifies the complainer as none other than Judas Iscariot! In reply, Jesus calmed His irritated followers. He pointed out that the lady "has done a beautiful thing to me. For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me."

Of course, we must not use this account to discredit attempts at poverty relief as have some Bible commentators. They infer that our Lord's words seem to hint at the almost futile attempt to eradicate poverty as a goal in itself. Taken properly, Jesus instead condemned the disciples' hypocrisy at appearing outraged at this woman's

fantastically generous gift. She intended publicly to honour and worship Jesus. He said it was done "to prepare Me for burial." He was already alluding to His upcoming passion.

Jesus' consistent message throughout His ministry was not a fatalist's lament that the world would always have its poor. Our Lord spoke in defense of those who suffered

privation. He healed the sick and restored repentant sinners to their families. Perhaps the most powerful instance of social justice as a Gospel imperative comes not from the story of the Rich Man and poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) or the parable of the Rich Young Man (Mt. 19:16-30) but rather, Jesus' description of the Final Judgment (Mt. 25:31-46). There, social justice is practically enshrined in Jesus' words to the blessed: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave

me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." When the blessed (and later, the wicked) ask Jesus plaintively, "Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and ministered to you?" Jesus answers "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

St. Paul summarizes the imperative for social justice in his second letter to the Corinthians 1:3-7, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

In this context, St. Paul joins material and spiritual afflictions. Christ's comfort here benefits the whole person—not merely with food for the hungry but vitally, with His salvation from sin and death.

The bombshell on social justice landed in St. James' letter where he asks: "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?" (James 2:14-16)



LCC combined disaster relief with and Gospel proclamation in Nicaragua

Believers in Christ consequently have heeded the Bible's clear instruction to have pity and show mercy for human suffering. We can act upon a Scriptural basis for extending mercy.

Historically, one other difficulty for Christian groups desiring to send humanitarian aid abroad or set up social justice agencies is the problem of overlap. For example, a recent article in the British magazine *The Economist* pointed out: "The biggest problem [for social justice] is too many aid agencies and the challenge is coordinating them...the best way of coping with the fragmentation of aid [in Africa] is for recipient countries to lay down a set of national development priorities and ask donors to fit in with their plans."

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, effective social justice and humanitarian relief delivery have become one of the more troubling topics for many national church bodies. Are the mission goals spiritual or material? Realistically, both must come into the picture. As the worthy causes multiply, the best global response for our church body has been a unique partnership between Lutheran Church-Canada (LCC) and other Canadian Lutherans under the umbrella of CLWR (Canadian Lutheran World Relief).

Within this organization, relief projects are carefully screened, field offices are staffed with national workers

and statistical progress, recorded and measured. The keyword is accountability to donors and efficiency in relief delivery. LCC does not expect its development and relief partner, CLWR, to do other tasks apart from human aid delivery.

Of course, Gospel proclamation is essential. It is the priority. This vital aspect of international missions comes directly under the warrant of LCC and its Committee for Mission and Social Ministry Services and our auxiliary mission groups such as Lutheran Women's Missionary League-Canada and Concordia Lutheran Mission Society. We pray for faithful missionaries for, as Our Lord said, "The fields are white for the harvest."

Partnering with professionals such as CLWR, however, frees the expatriate or local missionary from sorting out *gumka*, and allows him to establish Gospel priorities and keeping eyes focused on the cross of Christ and its message of pardon and peace for those who repent and believe.

Economic disaster, despite its inflicted pain, may even open a door, as it did for LCC in Nicaragua, for the birth of a creative mission response. As we learned, God always reserves His prerogative to turn misfortune into blessing.

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## Gospel proclamation is the priority.

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