

How do we help those who need help?

First of all, there is another question formulated in our conference schedule: How can we ensure that church life and diaconia, faith and Christian love do not drift apart, but work together? My short answer to this is: We need to always keep and live Christ's legacy of love as a basis of our fellowship and our work. This has been practiced by the early church (Acts chapters 4.6.11). Now I come to the question: What is the best way to help those who need help? I would say, the person who wants to help others, must have a heart to come into the midst of the people's problems and to be to them not a lord or master but a brother, a sister and a friend (Ezekiel 3: 13-15; Job 11:13).

1. Think outside the box

Through the centuries, many Christians have been inspired by the biblical texts to help the poor and needy. Otto of Freising once wrote: "Speaking frankly, I do not really know whether the current prosperous condition of the church is more pleasing to God than its earlier humility. That earlier condition was perhaps better, but the present one is more agreeable!" Otto of Freising lived in the Holy Roman Empire of the 12th century. He was a man who thought outside the box. He identified the kingdom of God with the church and saw it coming to fruition in the political and ecclesiastical order of his day. Yet in his frustration and hope, he was attracted to the simplicity of the early church (Acts 4: 32ff). The longing for a return to so called "primitive Christianity" eventually became a self-conscious impulse toward reform which led to what some have called "the renaissance of the 12th century". This reached its spiritual high point in Francis of Assisi and his humble band of followers.

August Francke, Count of Zinzendorf, Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, Georg Müller, Hudson Taylor, William Carey, William Wilberforce, Florence Nightingale, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu all had or have a strong faith and the motivation to make a big difference to the needs of those around them. "Great works do not always lie in our way, but every moment we may do little ones excellently, that is, with great love" (St. Francis de Sales). Each one of us has a need and each one of us has gifts (1st Peter 4: 9-11; Romans 12: 3-13). This is why and how we can help one another.

2. Shouldn't we Christians be God's hands of help?

Calling ourselves "Christians", brings with it the duty and the privilege of a lifetime of service. The life of Jesus Christ is a living example that teaches us to serve our brothers and sisters on earth. The Bible talks about the way we should treat the world and the people we share it with. Particularly the poor, the needy and the people who have been displaced as result of conflict or violence, need our special attention. We should serve them, regardless their race, gender or religion. We should take joy in serving others and expecting nothing in return. "Kindness is a language which the dumb can speak, the deaf can understand" (C.N. Bovee). Service is a way to practice doing what Jesus would do. It connects us to those we serve and gives us a kind of satisfaction that self-interest can never offer. Some people become an answer to other people's prayer in doing humanitarian aid. God surely regards all efforts done for the suffering people unimportantly whether the helpers count themselves to be part of the church, or not. But those who do so actually have no choice. God clearly expects social engagement from us so it is our obligation to never forget to do our very best in this area. In addition, we should think of the eternal destiny of the people whom we help. Jesus never taught that the physical world was irrelevant or secondary. Physical or social needs like food, safe drinking water, medical care, and jobs are really important. But the same is the spiritual life. Jesus met the people's physical needs first or at the same time that He addressed their spiritual needs. In this way, they never forgot what they had been told

about God's love because they had experienced it in a practical way. "If I had my time again, I would be stronger on social injustices and less involved in parties and politics" (Billy Graham).

3. Many people have even risked their lives to help others



Dr. James W.C. Pennington (1809- 1870)

Pennington was born a slave in Washington County, Maryland. After escaping to Petersburg (now called York Springs), Pennsylvania, he moved to New York in 1828. A blacksmith by trade, he settled in New Haven, Connecticut, and audited classes at Yale Divinity School from 1834 to 1839. Pennington became the first black man to attend classes at Yale. He was subsequently ordained as a Presbyterian minister and became a teacher, abolitionist, and author. Pennington wrote "The Origin and History of the Colored People" in 1841, which has been called the "first history of African Americans", and an autobiographic slave narrative in 1850, "The Fugitive Blacksmith". In 1849, the University of Heidelberg awarded him an honorary doctorate of divinity. This came because the Heidelberg theologian Friedrich Wilhelm Carové who was a democratic activist and a leader in the international peace movement, was very impressed by Pennington and his message. He saw the potential to not only help his cause but also to further the democratic liberal movement in Germany. In the days when truth was known to be wrong, darkness was called light and the other way round, there still were people who were bold enough to stand up for what is the right. Pennington was helped by Christians called Quakers, Methodists and Presbyterians. Through the love and help he received, he was able to overcome the evil in his life and become an even greater help to many more people. Let us also think of those who need help around us. This was practiced by Jesus, the apostles and many others. The "habits of the heart" will enable us to see God at work in all of life's moments.



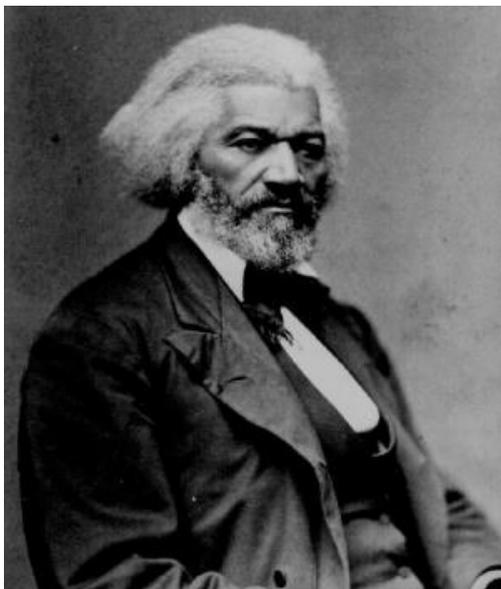
Sojourner Truth (1798- 1883)



Truth met with President Abraham Lincoln in 1864.

This painting of the meeting was done after Truth's death by artist Albion (Michigan), Franklin Courter. Lincoln is portrayed showing Truth the "Lincoln Bible," presented to him by the "Afro People" of Baltimore.

Born a slave, **Sojourner Truth** spread the fires of freedom all the way to the Congress where she talked to Abraham Lincoln. As a woman, she boldly voiced a link between the plight of slaves and that of American women. Born without hope, she received a call from God to preach a deeply felt message that people best show their love to God by their concern for others. Wherever she appeared, the wise words and electrifying presence of Sojourner Truth brought audiences to their feet. Most people in her audiences were white people, often pastors. Sojourner's challenge to injustice issued by her stinging speeches has secured her a place in American history, a place as a woman of courage and faith.



Frederick Douglass (1817- 1895)

Douglass was an American social reformer, orator, writer and statesman. After escaping from slavery, he became a leader of the abolitionist movement, gaining note for his dazzling oratory and incisive

antislavery writing. He stood as a living counter-example to slaveholders' arguments that slaves did not have the intellectual capacity to function as independent American citizens. Many Northerners also found it hard to believe that such a great orator had been a slave. After the Civil War, Douglass remained active in the United States' struggle to reach its potential as a "land of the free". Douglass actively supported women's suffrage. Following the war, he worked on behalf of equal rights for freedmen, and held multiple public offices. Douglass was a firm believer in the equality of all people, whether black, female, Native American, or recent immigrant. He was fond of saying, "I would unite with anybody to do right and with nobody to do wrong." "If I long to improve my brother, the first step toward

doing so is improve myself.” (Christian



Harriet Tubman (1822- 1913)

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Tubman was an African-American abolitionist, humanitarian, and Union spy during the American Civil War. She was also born into slavery. As a child in Dorchester County, Maryland, Tubman had been beaten by various masters to whom she was hired out. Early in her life, she suffered a head wound when hit by a heavy metal weight. The injury caused disabling seizures, narcoleptic attacks, headaches, and powerful visionary and dream activity, which occurred throughout her entire life. But because of her strong faith in God, Tubman didn't think of her own situation much. Rather, she effectively freed many people out of slavery.

In 1849, she escaped to Philadelphia, then immediately returned to Maryland to rescue her family. Slowly, one group at a time, she brought relatives out of the state, and eventually guided dozens of other slaves to freedom. Travelling by night, Tubman (or "Moses", as she was called) "never lost a passenger". She made thirteen missions to rescue more than 70 slaves using the network of antislavery activists and safe houses known as the "Underground Railroad". The people who helped her were white Christians who belonged either to the Methodist Church or to the Quakers. These denominations had never accepted slavery. Large rewards were offered for the return of many of the fugitive slaves, but no one then knew that Tubman was the one helping them. When the Southern-dominated Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, requiring law officials in Free states to aid efforts to recapture slaves, Tubman helped guide fugitives farther north into Canada, where slavery was prohibited. When the American Civil War began, Tubman worked for the Union Army, first as a cook and nurse, and then as an armed scouts and spy. The first woman to lead an armed expedition in the war, she guided the Combahee River Raid, which liberated more than 700 slaves in South Carolina. After the war, she retired to the family home in Auburn, New York, where she cared for her aging parents. She became active in the women's suffrage movement in New York until illness overtook her. Near the end of her life, she lived in a home for elderly African-Americans which she had helped found years earlier. "Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world" (Harriet Tubman).

Ministry of Presence

Jesus says: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matthew 25: 35,36). All the above mentioned people faced difficult challenges of their days. Since they put their trust in God, they first received inner healing from the wounds of their past and could later grow beyond themselves to help the suffering of humanity at their time and place. Mother Teresa said: "Kind words can be short and easy to speak but their echoes are truly endless." Her free service to the people of India offered a picture of the grace of God, a priceless gift which can never be repaid. "The heart that breaks open can contain the

whole universe” (Joanna Macy). Napoleon was famous to some and infamous to others, and Jesus, crucified 2000 years ago, became greater with the passing years. True greatness can be found in people who do not or did not think of themselves to be great. Jesus said: “But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10: 43-45). A French monk of the 17th century is lovingly remembered as “Brother Lawrence”. He said: “There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God as you serve people.” He called this “the practice of the presence of God”. He prayed: “Lord of all pots and pans and things... Make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates!”

The two belong together

Sherwood Wirt writes: “To pit social action against evangelism is to raise a phony issue, one that Jesus would have spiked in a sentence. He commanded his disciples to spread the Good News, and to let their social concern be made manifest through the changed lives of persons of ultimate worth”. It is a scandal when we as Christians divide the Gospel into two parts. The Church is prophetic when it works for justice in society (Psalms 82: 1-4; Amos 5: 21-24; Ezekiel 22: 1-31). As Christians, we bear a particular responsibility to the poor and oppressed. The treatment of the needy and of those who have no social power should be our first priority, not the last thing we think of. The church should work for the physical and social needs of people not as though this was an exclusive task but as a testimony of the redeemed. People often raise the question of how the Christian faith can claim exclusivity in a pluralistic world. The answer is that every major religion claims exclusivity at its core. We should keep in mind the importance of both the social and the spiritual needs of people. Our faith should speak through our works of love. In conformity with our Christian principles we should provide better perspectives for those living in less developed areas of the world. “Help us to help each other, Lord each other’s cross to bear, let each his friendly aid afford, and feel his brother’s care” (Charles Wesley).

In the 4th century, Emperor Julian I identified Christian by their lifestyle. He launched a campaign to institute pagan charities in an effort to match the Christians. In his letter to Galatia 362 he wrote that the pagans needed to equal the virtues of Christians. He supposed Christian growth to be caused by their “moral character, even if pretended,” and by their “benevolence toward strangers and care for the graves of the dead.” In a letter to another, Julian wrote: “I think that when the poor happened to be neglected and overlooked by the impious, Galileans observed this and devoted themselves to benevolence.” And he also wrote: “The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well; everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.”

Prayer

O God, whose Spirit guides us into all truth and makes us free: Strengthen and sustain us in your work. Give us vision and courage to stand against oppression and injustice and all that works against the glorious liberty to which you call all your children; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(www.akebulan-gm.org)

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