

# Lutherans in Social Service

Care for the poor and those in dire need has been a Lutheran concern from the beginning of the Reformation. In 1522, only five years after the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses, the reformers issued the Wittenberg Church Order, something of an outline for how a reshaped church community was to conduct itself. And part of that document was the call for a common or community chest—a fund that would, among other things, provide for poor orphans and children of poor people, provide refinancing of high-interest loans at 4 percent for those who were in financial trouble, and underwrite education or training for poor children. (Tellingly, Luther was challenged on the possibility of abuse, and he responded, “He who has nothing to live on should be aided. If he deceives us, what then? He must be aided again.”) These ideas were soon being put into practice—not just in Wittenberg, but in other cities as far away as Strasbourg. When the pastor of St. Mary’s Church in Wittenberg, Johannes Bugenhagen, became involved, the church orders also took up the cause of health care.



From that time on, Lutherans have keenly felt the responsibility to care for those in need, and that has been addressed in ways suitable for the time. An important step was taken by nineteenth-century German pastor Theodor Fliedner. Assigned to a poor town called Kaiserswerth (now part of Düsseldorf), he began working with inmates in the dilapidated prison there. Once he got a chaplain assigned to that prison, his focus shifted to caring for inmates, especially women, after their release. This, in turn, led to his development of a plan

whereby young women would be trained to care for the sick, since there were few hospitals at that time. In 1836 he opened both a hospital and a school for training women in theology and nursing. He called these women deaconesses.

One of the graduates of that school was Mother Katinka Guldberg, who established a deaconess house in Kristiania (now Oslo), Norway, where one of her students was a young Elisabeth Fedde. After working for a time in northern Norway, Fedde moved to New York City to begin ministry there. In short order, she founded or cofounded the Norwegian Relief Society, a deaconess house, and a small hospital that eventually became the Lutheran Medical Center in Brooklyn. After a few years, she moved to Minneapolis, where again she founded a deaconess center and a hospital that has now become part of the Hennepin County Medical Center. Hospitals in Chicago and Grand Forks, North Dakota, can also be traced to her work. Other important activity in social services was propelled by Pastor William Passavant.



These days Lutheran care for the needy can readily be seen in the work of Lutheran service organizations across the country, often among the most active such agencies in any given area. Worldwide, Lutheran World Relief is known and respected not only for showing up where needed, but for staying there even after the news reports fade away. In 2015 Lutheran World Relief touched over four million people in thirty-six countries.