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The Reformation and the power of  
Lutheran social ministry continues today

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Lutheran Services in America  
20th Anniversary

# In 1517 Martin Luther,

a theologian and Roman Catholic monk, set out to reform the Roman Catholic Church.

At the time, the Pope and certain bishops insisted that believers could become more certain of their salvation by making gifts or purchasing special dispensations—known as indulgences—for past sins. Luther objected to this doctrine arguing instead that Christians were saved solely by the grace of God through Christ and that individuals did not bear the responsibility for their salvation.

Luther laid out his reform proposals in a series of ninety-five theses. In doing so he set the groundwork for what would become the Protestant movement. Luther also created a new approach to charity and service. He argued that because people are saved by grace, in gratitude, they are free to serve others.

## THE COMMON CHEST

Luther's call that people care for one another in response to God's grace created the framework for modern social services.

Together with the Wittenberg Council, Luther set up what was essentially the first social services agency in Europe—the Common Chest. The purpose of the chest was simple—to distribute funds to any and all in need.

Funds from the Common Chest provided assistance to orphans, children and women, paid for education and vocational training and provided medical services. The chest also provided low-interest loans to artisans and refinanced high-interest loans. The idea was that service was not simply about giving charity to the poor, but about helping people avoid poverty in the first place. The Common Chest—and the philosophy behind it—laid the groundwork for what we know today as Lutheran social ministry.

**“For so to help a man that he does not need to become a beggar is just as much of a good work and virtue as to give alms to a man who has already become a beggar. —MARTIN LUTHER”**

## LUTHERAN SOCIAL MINISTRY

As Luther's writings spread throughout Europe, so did the practice of establishing a Common Chest. In modern times when churches and congregations organize to fulfill a need in their community their work is known as a social ministry. Lutheran social ministry organizations—nonprofit groups established with a Lutheran connection—carry on the Reformation ideas of Luther and his followers.

In the United States, Lutheran social ministry grew significantly after the U.S. Civil War. Lutheran churches, clergy and deaconesses established organizations to care for orphaned children, seniors, veterans and others recovering from the conflict.

Those efforts and organizations continued and new groups were established over the years. Today there are over 300 Lutheran social ministry organizations in the United States.

**LSA + 300 members = Care for 6 million Americans**



**195**

Senior  
Services



**103**

Health  
Care



**50**

Disability  
Services



**105**

Children,  
Youth &  
Families



**31**

Immigration  
& Refugee  
Services



**55**

Housing &  
Community  
Development

## LUTHERAN SERVICES IN AMERICA

In 1997 Lutheran social ministry organizations united—along with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod—to form Lutheran Services in America.

With over \$21 billion in annual revenue, Lutheran Services in America is now one of the country's largest nonprofit organizations.

Lutheran Services in America members provide services to seniors, children, youth and families, refugees, people with disabilities, veterans and those affected by disasters—making a difference in the lives of one in 50 Americans every year. The work takes place in communities rural and urban and serves all—regardless of faith, race, ethnicity or background.

And while much has changed in 500 years, Luther's call to Christians to care for those in need is what drives today's work.

**300**

HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES NONPROFITS

**21B**

ANNUAL REVENUE

**1 IN 50**

AMERICANS CARED FOR EACH YEAR



THE FUTURE OF LUTHERAN SOCIAL MINISTRY

# united

Luther's call for Christians to care for all is as relevant today as it was 500 years ago—and will remain relevant in the years ahead.

While society has advanced, solving the problems of poverty and health care are no less complex. But Lutheran Services in America is at the center of leading large, broad system change.

As a network, Lutheran Services in America organizations collaborate, innovate and replicate successful strategies and programs. Together the network is creating a better, stronger

and more resilient health care and social services sector. And with a unified voice, Lutheran Services in America advocates for the nation's most vulnerable people.

As we look to the future, the organizations that make up Lutheran Services in America are united in their mission to strengthen communities, to solve complex problems and to ensure that all people can live abundant lives—delivering on the promise of the Reformation.



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