

The Church and Its Ministers

By Pastor Charles F. Degner

In 1986 God called me to serve Saint Peter congregation after serving for seven years in a mission congregation. Frankly, I thought I had seen it all in that small, suburban congregation – marriage problems, divorce, and even murder. When I moved to a congregation five times larger, I was not prepared to deal with so many problems at once. Immediately, I was faced with two messy divorces and two live-in situations.

My Uncle Erwin came to visit me at that time. You may remember him as “Smiley” in Latin class at Northwestern College. I always respected him, even feared him sometimes. We took a walk around the block and I poured out my heart and my pastoral problems to him. When I finished telling him my story, he said, “Charlie, I don’t know if I can give you advice. I was in the parish ministry for ten years and I only ran into a problem like this once. A husband and wife were threatening divorce, so I went over and straightened them out, and that was that.” What a wonderful time that must have been to be a pastor!

It has grown worse in the last twenty years since I took that walk with my uncle. What do you do when one of your members commits suicide, and you learn that her lesbian lover had left her the week before? What do you do when a young woman wants her child baptized, and when you ask about her father, you find out that she and her lesbian friend have adopted this child together? What do you do when her parents storm into your office, angry because you wouldn’t permit them to have this baptism in the worship service on Sunday morning?

In the early years of my ministry, if you spoke to a couple who were living together, they would at least agree that what they were doing was a sin. They gave you excuses, but they did not deny their sin. They even look ashamed. Now you see this blank look on their faces as if this was the first time they ever thought that what they were doing was wrong. How many hours must you spend with them so that they can at least make a decision about their spiritual lives from knowledge instead of ignorance?

We are serving in difficult times. Luther said in his hymn, “The Word they still shall let remain, nor any thanks have for it.” The Christmas and Easter Christians don’t come on Christmas and Easter any more. People who come twice a month consider themselves regular. Children learn from early on that sports tournaments trump church services every time. These are not easy times for the ministers of God’s Church.

Don’t you wish you were a pastor in those earlier, simpler days when Uncle Erwin served? You should not long for those days, because God has not called you to be a pastor in an easy time. God has called you to serve in a difficult time, in these times before Jesus comes again. Brothers, God has not called us to hide behind our computer screens, pretending to do the work of the ministry. God has not called us to be CEO’s of a corporation of Christians called Saint _____. He has called us to be leaders of his people in a generation in which everyone does what is right in his own eyes. God has not called us to be lords over his flock. He has called us

to be servants of those who are kings and priests and shepherds of their souls.

These are difficult times for ministers of the gospel. They are also the most exciting of times. When in history has God ever brought so many people of so many nations to our doorsteps? When in history have there been so many opportunities for ministry as we have today? When before has God instilled in our youth a Weltanschauung that makes them see the world as a small and accessible place? God has called you to be shepherds in the most exciting moments of history, a moment in which we may see Jesus coming in glory from heaven. Let's take a few moments today to study the Word together so that we can find focus for our ministry and courage to conduct it.

1. God has called every believer in his Church to witness to the world and to minister to one another with the means of grace.

- 1.1. In the Old West, when the streets of Dodge were running with blood and the citizens were terrified in their homes, the citizens would look for the meanest gunslinger they could find to clean up their streets. They stood back and went about their business while the marshal killed all the bad guys. When the marshal had killed all the bad guys, the citizens were happy to see him leave town. Sometimes I think that this has become the model of public ministry today in the parishes of the Wisconsin Synod.
- 1.2. It is no secret that our members are living in a culture which has only one god – the god of tolerance. There is only one sin – the sin of intolerance. A visiting theologian said just that in a lecture at St. Olaf College in Minnesota a few years ago. It is not surprising that a Hindu is the head of the religion department in this Lutheran College. This has rubbed off on our people, as all cultural sins are wont to do. Mothers and fathers are afraid of their rebellious sons and daughters and do not want to point out their sins of adultery or their neglect of God's Word. Some value a wedding in church more than their children's eternal salvation. Many of them have nothing to say because they were guilty of the same sin themselves.
- 1.3. After taking a young couple through sixteen weeks of a BIC class, I hoped they would see the light and repent. It was actually my member and not the young woman who was hearing the Word for the first time that resisted the most. She wanted to move up the wedding while he was adamant. When I spoke to his parents about this, his mother said, "My son's father and I lived together before we were married and it worked out for us. I have taught my children that the only thing that is important is that they love each other." Should this surprise us? Jesus once told Peter, *"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."* Matthew 16:23
- 1.4. Others who are more spiritual hope that the pastor will notice their children's absence from church and speak the truth in love to their children. They prefer to have their pastor do the ministry for them instead of learning from him how to do it themselves. This is not scriptural. We may even buy into this concept because it makes us feel important. It makes us feel needed.

- 1.5. Do you really want to do this by yourself? Do you want to be the only one in your congregation who searches for the lost sheep? How many people in your congregation are despising the means of grace? Forty? A hundred and forty? Do you really expect to reach every one of them effectively before Jesus comes again, or before you must bury one of them with a guilty conscience because you have not visited him in over two years? This is not the model of a healthy ministry for a Christian congregation.

- 1.6. Jesus has given the ministry of the keys to every believer in his church.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." **Matthew 16: 13-19**

- 1.7. Roman Catholic theology has been so dominant for so many years that it can influence the people in the pew in subtle ways. Our people probably don't believe that Peter was the first pope. Many of them do believe (or at least they act as if they believe) that the pastor is the only person who can properly use the keys of the kingdom of heaven in a Christian congregation. That's good, Roman Catholic theology. Jesus gave the keys to Peter, and the pope gave the keys to the priests, and they are the only ones who can forgive sins or not forgive them.
- 1.8. Let's make sure we do understand these words correctly. Jesus did give the keys of the kingdom to Peter personally. He is not speaking to all of the disciples here, only to Peter. He uses the singular second person pronoun. He gives Peter the keys because he has made a wonderful confession of faith in Jesus. He made this confession, not because it was revealed to him by men, but because it was revealed to him by God. So Jesus has given the keys to every believer who confesses this same gospel. Jesus builds his church on this rock, this confession of the gospel, and the gates of hell will not hold up against it.
- 1.9. Do you catch the nuance of the word picture Jesus uses? Imagine the ancient castle with strong gates. There is an army battering the gates. Who is attacking whom in his picture? We are not the ones in the fortress, trembling as the oak splinters and the stones crumble. It is the devil in the fortress and he is trembling when God's people attack his kingdom with the gospel. He has heard the promise of Jesus as well as we have. The gates of hell cannot hold up when the gospel is confessed. Like Samson at the gates of Gaza, we destroy the gates of hell when we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to confess the gospel.

- 1.10. Can you imagine the devil trembling in fear today because a small army of believers has invaded China with the Word of God in their book bags? The devil knows that there are billions of souls at stake. There are teachers teaching classes and confessing the gospel when they can. We are not the only Christians who are doing this. The walls the devil has built around China are crumbling. I am glad that I am not on the devil's side. I would rather be on Jesus' side, the winning side. A brother once encouraged me by telling me that **the devil can't win**. I believe that it is so, because the gates of hell cannot prevail against the ministry of the gospel.
- 1.11. So how do we know that EVERY believer has been given the ministry of the keys, and not just Peter? Jesus makes that clear in Matthew 18. In the first part of the chapter, Jesus rebukes the disciples for not wanting the mothers to bring their children to him. He warns them not to do anything that would cause a little one to sin. Then he tells the story of the lost sheep. This story teaches us that the Father does not want one of his sheep to be lost. In the following verses he shows his disciples, all of them, how to go and rescue the lost.

¹⁵If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. Matthew 18: 15-20

It is plain in these verses that Jesus is speaking to all of the disciples and to every believer in his Church. If a believer knows that his brother has sinned, Jesus tells him to go and talk to him. He doesn't run to the pastor first. He goes alone. He is equipped with the keys of the kingdom and he is going in the Spirit of Christ. If his brother repents, he has the authority to tell him, "Your sins are forgiven." If he does not repent, he has the authority to tell him, "Your sins are not forgiven." Only when his brother stubbornly refuses to repent does he bring witnesses with him. Only when repeated admonition with the two or three fails does he tell it to the Church.

- 1.12. And what is the Church to this brother who has sinned? It is the two or three or more who have gathered together in Jesus' name with the purpose to minister to him in his lost condition. The Church possesses the keys because of the believers in it. It is not the Church which gives the keys to the believers, but the other way around. "There am I with them," Jesus says. He guides his people together with their leaders and their pastor to speak his judgment on the impenitent and the message of forgiveness to those who repent.
- 1.13. After his resurrection Jesus again makes it clear that all of the disciples have the right

and authority to proclaim sins forgiven or not forgiven.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²²And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." John 20: 21-23

Jesus tells us that he sends us for the same reason and in the same way that the Father sent him. If you want a model for your ministry as a believer, then watch Jesus in action. He pointed out the sin of the rich young man who came to him. It says that he "looked at him and loved him" ^{Mark 10:21} before he spoke these words. Preaching the law is an act of love. When the young man walked away, Jesus did not run after him to soften the judgment of the law. He let the judgment stand on his heart. On the other hand, when the self-righteous would have stoned a woman caught in adultery, Jesus stood between them until they went away. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." ^{John 8:11} Jesus declared her forgiven and encouraged her in a life of repentance. This is what believers do with the keys which Jesus has given them. They minister with the means and with the method that Jesus used. They apply law to the impenitent and tell them that they are not forgiven, as long as they do not repent. To those who repent, they show the nail marks in Jesus' hands and say, "Peace be with you; your sins are forgiven."

- 1.14. Please note that we are still talking about our ministry as believers, not as those who have been called by believers. Have you ever heard anyone say, "I am just a lay person?" When did we ever begin to play down the ministry of the "lay person?" We should do the opposite. We should exalt the ministry of every believer, as Peter does for us in his letter.

⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 1 Peter 2: 9-10

The word "lay" comes from the Greek word in this text (laos). We are the people belonging to God. I am never just a lay person. I am first and foremost a lay person. Before I became a pastor I was a lay person (laos) and I am still a lay person (laos).

- 1.15. More than that, God has called us to be kings and priests. This title that God has given us as believers is greater than any title we might have as ministers in the public ministry.

Not only are we the freest of kings, we are also priests forever, which is far more excellent than being kings, for as priest we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things. These are the functions of priests and they cannot be granted to any unbeliever. Thus Christ has made it possible for us, provided we believe in him, to be not only his brethren, co-heirs, and fellow kings, but also his

fellow priests.¹

- 1.16. So why are the people of God in our parishes so afraid to use the ministry of the keys and carry out their function as kings and priests? It has much to do with ignorance on their part. They cannot rebuke because they cannot point to the Scriptures and say, "The Lord says ..." They do not have the spirit of Christ in their ministry to the lost because they do not sit at the master's feet and listen. The people of God who are studying his Word have no trouble teaching their children the truths of God's Word every day. Later in life when their children wander from the faith, Christian parents are quick to come to them and remind them what God's Word says. They do it with conviction and with love, because they have Jesus. Our calling is to lead our people into the word and to train and teach them from it.
- 1.17. Thirteen year old twins in my confirmation class told me that they were worried about their bachelor uncle. "Uncle Donny doesn't go to church," they said. "We told him that God's Word is the most important thing in his life and that he will lose his faith if he doesn't listen to it." Even children rise up to be kings and priests when they are studying God's Word.
- 1.18. Sometimes public ministers discourage the people of God in their parishes by making them feel ignorant and ill prepared to function as priests. Do we ever let our people pray to begin a meeting, or have members of our council share a devotion with the rest? A pastor in our district was called away from the church for an emergency just before the church council meeting. A few minutes after seven, the chairman came over to the parsonage and asked the pastor's wife if she could come over and begin their meeting with a prayer. Why did these men have such a low opinion of their priesthood? Do we give the impression to our people that God has called us to be the priest in our church and we are the only ones who can pray properly?
- 1.19. One of my great weaknesses as a pastor is thinking that no one in the congregation is a better evangelist to win the lost or regain the straying than I am. The fact is that the priests in our congregation are often better equipped than we are. I may know my Bible better than Joe Elder knows his Bible. But Joe knows his delinquent brother and loves him more than I ever will. He knows why his brother doesn't go to church. And, Joe's brother knows that he can't pull the wool over Joe's eyes the way he did to his pastor on his last visit.
- 1.20. What if, instead of personally visiting the prodigal sons and daughters of your congregation, you visited their brothers (and sisters) instead and prepared them to bring God's Word to their loved ones? My associate has developed a series of five half page Bible studies to use with inactive members. They are short and concise and to the point. They are simple Bible stories like Mary and Martha or the Parable of the Sower with questions that follow. What if you prepared your faithful member to visit his brother five times with these Bible stories instead of you visiting him once, if you have the time, and if you can get by his caller i.d.? God has not called us to be THE priest, but to train

¹ *Luther's Works*, Volume 31, edited by Harold Grumm (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1957) page 355.

the priests to carry on the ministry that Jesus has given his church.

2. When believers gather together, they call people to serve the body of Christ in acts of public ministry so that the preaching of the gospel is done in a fitting and orderly way.

2.1. I am amazed at the freedom that God has given us in the New Testament to carry on the ministry of the gospel. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he commanded his disciples to teach and preach the gospel to the very ends of the earth (Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15; Lk 24:47-48; Jn 20:22-23, Ac 1:8). This is how Jesus instituted the ministry of the gospel. He simply told us to do it and promised to be with us always as we go out in his name. Nowhere does he give us instructions as to what forms we must use. Instead, he entrusts his Church to carry on this ministry in a fitting and orderly way (1 Cor 14:40). He entrusts us to do this because he has given us his Word and his Spirit and is present himself in our midst. We do not need a detailed manual, as God gave his people in the Old Testament.

2.2. There is another reason why Jesus entrusts this mission to his Church without prescribing the forms we should use in carrying it out.

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,² to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Ephesians 4: 7-13

Jesus led his Church in Paul's day and he still leads his Church today. He leads his Church by supplying her with all the gifts she needs to carry on the ministry of the gospel. He gives every believer gifts to use and measures them as he wills. He also gives his Church gifted leaders who can train the people of God to carry out the ministry of the gospel. In his missionary journeys, Paul was always training people for ministry. He mentored Timothy and Titus and Luke and others. He developed congregational leaders like Aquila and Priscilla. Jesus did the same in his ministry. He both ministered to God's people and he trained his disciples for ministry at the same time. We ought to do the same.

2.3. Some have argued that the pastoral ministry is the one God-ordained office of ministry in the church, and that God's church cannot exist without it. This passage would not support that. Jesus gave the church apostles who had the gift of inspiration and who provided God's church with the foundation of God's Word (Eph 2:20). When his Church did not need apostles, he gave no more.

- 2.4. He gave some to be prophets. What was their function? Agabus foretold future events (Ac 11:28;21:10,11). Paul mentions prophets in his letter to the Corinthians, whose ministry was not always orderly (1 Cor 14). It seems their primary task was expounding God's Word. Does this "office" exist in the Church today? We are not thinking correctly in asking this question. Jesus has given us only one office, the office of preaching the Word. He provides his church any and every form of ministry which the Church needs to carry on this task. We do not look for those who can predict the future for us. It would appear at this time that Jesus has not given his church "prophets" in the sense that Agabus was a prophet. Jesus has certainly given us men who are gifted at expounding the Word of God to us. We do not call them "prophets." We call them professors or teachers, and they are gifts which Jesus has given to his Church to equip the saints.
- 2.5. Philip was called an evangelist (Ac 21:8) and Paul told Timothy to do the work of an evangelist (2 Tm 4:5). It seems that evangelists in New Testament times were those who traveled about telling people about Jesus. Do we still have such an office today? Our missionaries certainly do the work of an evangelist. Others certainly do the work of evangelists. Again, we do not have descriptions of these various forms of ministry because the form is determined by the need.
- 2.6. Paul mentions "pastors and teachers" last in his list. One article is assigned for both words so that both words are describing one form of public ministry (τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους). If I had to choose words that best described what I do as a pastor of a congregation in the Wisconsin Synod, I would choose these words. God has called us to be a ποιμένας, a pastor, a shepherd. A shepherd watches over his flock and leads his flock to green pastures and fresh water. He tends to them when they are sick and weak and helps them to grow and mature. Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd. I cannot think of a more honorable title than that of "pastor."
- 2.7. Paul also calls this form of ministry "teachers" (διδασκάλους). I love to do this more than anything else in my ministry. I love to teach from the pulpit and I love to teach my confirmation classes. I love to teach a lesson to the council before it meets and I love the one-on-one instruction to people who are getting married or who want to join our congregation. Jesus has given us this measure of grace, this abundant measure, that we can bring people to Jesus' feet and teach them his Word as his representatives (Lk 10:16).
- 2.8. This form of the ministry, the teaching shepherd, seems to be the most similar to the work of the pastor today. I know that such a form will always be present in Jesus' church. The risen Savior, the Shepherd of the Sheep, will raise up shepherds to lead his flock.

³ *"I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. ⁴ I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD.* Jeremiah 23: 3-4

At the same time this form of ministry in Paul's day is not the same as we know it today. We train men in seminaries and we send them to congregations around the world. Congregations in the New Testament times gathered and chose a pastor from among them. In mission congregations, someone like Titus, whom Paul left in Crete to organize the ministry of the congregations there, appointed them.

- 2.9. Even the words used to describe these positions differ. We have looked at two of the words which Paul used - ποιμν (shepherd) and διδασκάλος (teacher). Paul uses the word ἐπίσκοπος in his farewell to the elders in Ephesus.

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Acts 20: 28-29

This is a wonderful word to describe what we do as pastors. The emphasis is on watching over the flock. Picture the vigilant shepherd, who stays awake through the night, keeping his flock safe from the savage wolves. This is what God the Holy Spirit has called us to do. Do you miss that twenty-three year old when he stops coming to church? Maybe there has been a dangerous change in his life. Do you pay a visit to the person who went through Bible Information Class, who came every Sunday and now has begun to miss every other Sunday? You have enough experience to know that the parable of the sower was speaking to just such a faith. This is what God the Holy Spirit has called you to do. It is too bad that the word "bishop" has come to mean one who rules in the church rather than one who watches over the flock!

- 2.10. And of course we are only under-shepherds to the real Shepherd of our souls!

²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd (ποιμένα) and Overseer (ἐπίσκοπον) of your souls. ¹ Peter 2: 24-25

This passage is a great comfort to me in my ministry. If the salvation of those entrusted to me depended only on me, how sad that would be! The sheep would be in great danger! I know that they have a Good Shepherd who never slumbers or sleeps. They have a Good Shepherd who even died for them! This moves me not to complacency but to be the kind of shepherd that my Good Shepherd wants me to be!

- 2.11. Another word used for this form of ministry in the New Testament is the word πρεσβύτερος. Paul uses the word in his letter to Titus, where he commands Titus to "appoint elders in every town." ^{Titus 1: 5} He then gives Titus a list of qualifications for the elder, directing him to choose faithful men to shepherd and teach God's people. Is this form of ministry exactly what we have today? Not exactly.

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.¹⁸ For the Scripture says, “Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,”^b and “The worker deserves his wages.”¹⁹ Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.²⁰ Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.¹
 Timothy 5: 17-20

Paul talks about those whose work is preaching and teaching. Was this “elder” the same as our pastors today? Did the New Testament have non-teaching elders? Was the term much broader than we use it today? We don’t have to answer these questions because the believers were free to organize their ministry and the duties of the ministers in whatever way best accomplished the kingdom’s purpose.

2.12. There is much to be learned from this passage however. When believers call those who would serve in the ministry on their behalf, then they should honor them by compensating them appropriately. Those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:14). Second, members of the body of Christ must be careful when they entertain accusations against their called ministers. Can we teach our people to do this? We have worked through a document in the Minnesota District modeled after one put out by Parish Schools that can help lead people to encourage and correct their called workers in a respectful way without complaining to others. You can find this at www.welsmn.org. Gossip against called workers has become a plague among us. It ruins reputations. It causes divisions. It ruins the good name of a Christian congregation and the name of our Savior in the community. We cannot tolerate this!

2.13. Some of our people have a “hire them and fire them” mindset towards their called workers. What a sad way to treat those whom God the Holy Spirit has called and whom God’s Church has chosen to represent it in the public ministry of word and sacrament! Paul says in Romans:

¹⁴How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” Romans 10: 14-15

By whom are they sent? They are sent by God and they are sent by the gathering of believers who have chosen them to minister in their name. Paul had a direct call, an immediate call, from God. Jesus met him on the road to Damascus and set him aside as a chosen apostle. Yet the church in Antioch gathered to send Paul and Barnabas as missionaries in their name.

¹In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. ²While they were worshiping the

Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. Acts 13: 1-3

- 2.14. How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news! If Quasimodo were standing in the pulpit, preaching the Word of God in a droning voice, I should listen in rapt attention because one of God's ministers is bringing me to the feet of Jesus and I am listening to the Word! But our sinful nature wants only to be entertained and thrilled. We think everyone should be able to preach like _____. We don't all have such gifts! I remember a classmate who preached his sermon in homiletics class – only to have his classmates tear it apart for technicalities. He was so demoralized that he wondered if he was fit for the ministry. Prof. Joel Gerlach told him at the time: "Remember that you have sanctified listeners and not critics in the pew."
- 2.15. I have at least one such sanctified listener in the pew every Sunday. He is a retired pastor in my congregation, an Israelite in whom there is no guile. He loves the Word and misses no opportunity to hear it. He blesses me before church begins and he blesses me when he leaves the church. He puts me to shame, because often when I listen to someone preaching, I am thinking how I might have done it better. I am no different than the average person in the pew who despises the messenger and who despises the message, too. Shame on me!
- 2.16. Yet in my new man I do listen. Even if because of my sinful nature I cannot give complete attention to every word spoken, yet my pastor reaches me with one apt illustration. Perhaps he opens my eyes to one small word in Scripture. How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!
- 2.17. Our sinful nature and the sinful nature of our members want to interfere in God's business in other ways as well. Years ago at Martin Luther College there was always one call everyone dreaded. Mission – South Dakota. When that call was announced there was a collective gasp from the crowd – and a sob or two as well. At a recent call day at the seminary I witnessed a senior and his wife show more than a little disappointment when they learned where they would be going. Isn't this our sinful nature doubting the wisdom of God's Church with Jesus in her midst and with the Holy Spirit guiding her? Isn't it our sinful nature that yearns for a call that is better than the one we are holding right now?
- 2.18. Maybe we should not think of our call in this way, that we are "holding a call." It makes us sound more important than the call itself. This attitude is important when the ministry in a congregation changes. Let me give you an example. Let's say that a school in rural Minnesota goes from 140 students to 40 students in a ten year period. Does the congregation have the right to terminate a call for a teacher because it can no longer afford to have seven teachers with only 40 students? It does. Imagine in the same school that a teacher was called to teach just one grade. As the school shrinks the congregation asks him to teach three grades. Does the congregation have the right to do that? Yes it does. The gospel ministry belongs to the Church and not to the called worker. What if that teacher is capable of discipline in a single class and not in a

multiple classroom setting? How will this be resolved?

- 2.19. It is not so hard to resolve these issues about the Church and its ministers if both the people of the church and the ministers whom it has called approach these difficult times with their new man and not their sinful nature. The called worker will humbly realize that the ministry is much more important than he, himself. He will not say, “I was not called to do that.” That kind of attitude puts him above the church and above the call. On the other hand, the members of the church will so honor the ministry that it will do whatever it can to help and accommodate the called worker so that he can serve the ministry into which they have called him. How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news! Unfortunately we know how the devil can work mischief among God’s people when they let the Old Adam get the best of them.
- 2.20. When believers gather together and Jesus is among them, they call people who will bring the Word of God to them and to their children. As they organize the ministry of the gospel in their midst, the Holy Spirit is among them and guides them to choose men who will be their pastors and teachers. They do this because they love the Word of God and want to hear it and learn from it. They do this so that they will learn how to share the gospel with their friends and neighbors. Paul had to compliment the Thessalonians for such a spirit regarding the gospel ministry.

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. ¹ Thessalonians 1:4-9

The Thessalonians not only accepted the words Paul preached as the inspired word, they accepted Paul for the Word’s sake. When this spirit prevails in a Christian congregation, then God’s name is hallowed and God’s kingdom comes.

3. “So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. ²Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.” ¹ Corinthians 4: 1-2

- 3.1. The ministry of the gospel shapes our attitudes to our calling and people’s attitude towards us. We are “servants” of Christ. In this passage, Paul uses ὑπηρέτης, an “under-rower.” In Greek usage the ὑπηρέτης was the messenger of the gods. In the New Testament, it is often translated as “officer.” “The reference is always to a service of any kind which in structure and goal is controlled by the will of him to whom it is

rendered.”² We ought to regard ourselves as messengers of Christ whom he has called to carry out his will.

- 3.2. The second word that he uses to describe those who are called into the public ministry is οἰκονόμους μυστηρίων θεοῦ. Picture Joseph in Potiphar’s house and you will have in mind what a faithful steward is. His master was concerned with nothing except the food he ate. A faithful steward knows the will of his master and carries out his master’s business according to his master’s will. Jesus often used the picture of the household manager in his parables. And what has Jesus given us as a responsibility? He has given us nothing less than the mysteries of God. These mysteries are the unknowns of God and his plan of salvation, which God has revealed to us in his Word. As you witness and teach and proclaim God’s Word, you are continually making known the unknowns. I can think of nothing more exciting in my ministry than teaching a Bible information class and watching someone change from a person with a lot of opinions to a person who only wants to know what God’s opinion is.
- 3.3. Our calling and the gospel which we proclaim shape our opinion about ourselves. We should not hold ourselves in low esteem. God has called us to an important place in his kingdom. He doesn’t choose just anyone to be his kingdom business managers. The world tries to convince us that we are nothing. A number of years ago I watched a television movie, “The Day After,” about what it would be like after an all out nuclear confrontation. One scene pictured a pastor in a half-destroyed church ministering to a group of people with sores and runny noses from radiation sickness. He got into the pulpit to preach but he couldn’t think of anything to say. I wanted to scream at that moment. Nothing to say? I would have tons of comfort to bring to those whose world was blown away. I would have told them of the city without foundations whose architect and builder is God. Brothers, God has put us in this world and he has called us into this ministry and he has given us something to say in all the terrible circumstances of a person’s life!
- 3.4. At the same time remember that it is not your kingdom but Jesus’. You are only a servant in that kingdom. It is not your opinion that matters. It is what God says in his Word. It is not your vision that should guide your congregation, but the vision that Jesus has given his church on earth - to bring the gospel to people of every tribe and nation and language and people. It is not your judgment that ought to prevail in every matter in your church. The church which gathers and prays in Jesus’ name will still be there when you have passed on or have taken a call to another place. You are not the Lord of your congregation. Do not act like one.
- 3.5. Sometimes we ought to keep our opinion to ourselves. We imagine that God has given us wisdom in all things even beyond the secret things of God which he has revealed to us in his Word. We think we know what color the carpet should be in the narthex. We come to a congregation and immediately begin to change the worship style

²*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. 1964-c1976. Vols. 5-9 edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 compiled by Ronald Pitkin. (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (Vol. 8, Page 532). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

of that congregation, not because our congregation has asked us to do so, but because we want to worship in the way we think is best. We fight battles with our members over wages and hymnals and times of services because we think we are something more than a ὑπηρετής or a οἰκονόμος. The apostle who used these words explained them best. “*I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some*” (1 Corinthians 9:22). Those words are spoken by someone who knew what it meant to be a servant of Christ.

- 3.6. There are two other words which help shape our attitudes as ministers of the gospel.

*He has made us competent as ministers (διακόνους) of a new covenant—
not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*
2 Corinthians 3:6

*For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves
as your servants (δούλους) for Jesus' sake.* 2 Corinthians 4:5

It seems as if these words are used almost interchangeably, along with other words in the New Testament. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* gives these distinctions.

The concept of serving is expressed in Gk. by many words which are often hard to differentiate even though each has its own basic emphasis. → δουλεύω means to serve as a slave, with a stress on subjection. → θεραπεύω emphasises willingness for service and the respect and concern thereby expressed (esp. towards God). → λατρεύω means to serve for wages. In NT days it had come to be used predominantly for religious or cultic duties. → λειτουργέω denotes official public service to the people or to the state, being used in the LXX for service in the temple and in Christianity for service in the Church. ὑἁστῆτε means at root to steer. In terms of service, it signifies esp. the relation to the master to whom the service is rendered. In Xenoph. → ὑπηρετής is often used in the sense of adjutant. As distinct from all these terms, διακονέω has the special quality of indicating very personally the service rendered to another. It is thus closest to ὑπηρετέω, but in διακονέω there is a stronger approximation to the concept of a service of love.³

The word δούλους emphasizes our relationship to Christ especially. The word διακόνους emphasizes that what we do is a service to others. If you want to know your place in the kingdom, and it is a good place, then do a quick study of the passages that contain these words.

- 3.7. At the same time the ministry of the gospel shapes the attitudes of believers towards those whom they have called to serve them. “*So then, men ought to regard us as*

³*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. 1964-c1976. Vols. 5-9 edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 compiled by Ronald Pitkin. (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (Vol. 2, Page 81). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.” 1 Corinthians 4: 1-2

Paul does not say that people ought to regard ministers as their personal servants to do whatever they want them to do. People ought to regard us as servants of Christ. Imagine that you were doing business with the Microsoft Corporation and Bill Gates’ personal business manager asked to meet with you. You would not regard him as your lackey but as the representative of the owner of one of the most successful businesses in the world. People ought to regard their ministers that way – their pastors and their children’s Lutheran school teachers as well. They are servants of Christ – representatives of Christ.

- 3.8. Luther was wise to put our duties to pastors and teachers second in the list of the Table of Duties (right after the duties of the pastor!).

WHAT WE OWE TO OUR PASTORS AND TEACHERS

Anyone who receives instruction in the Word must share all good things with his instructor. (See Galatians 6:6.)

In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. (See 1 Corinthians 9:14).

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “The worker deserves his wages.” (See 1 Timothy 5:17,18)

Obeys your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. (See Hebrews 13:17.)

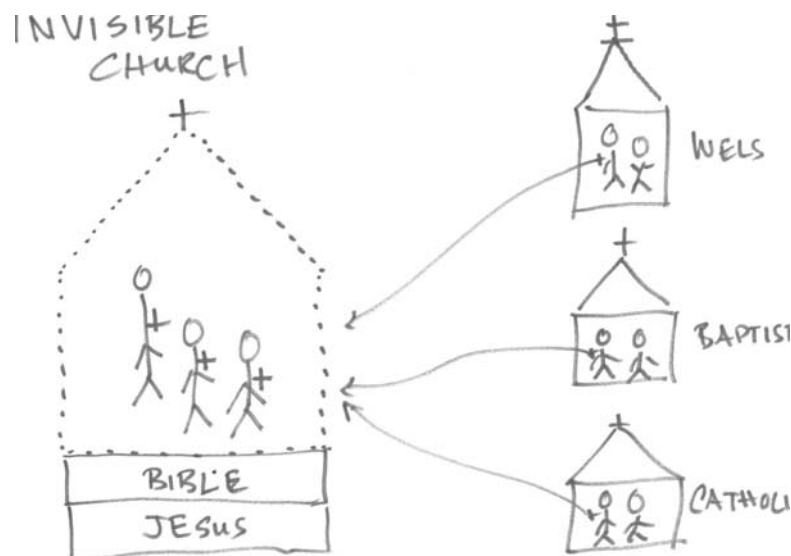
Do you hear how the writer to the Hebrews keeps the relationship between Christ and minister and people in mind? Ministers are accountable to Jesus. Even for the sake of keeping my call I will not compromise one doctrine of Scripture. Even if it means I will lose my biggest contributor I will not compromise one truth of God’s Word. I am accountable to Jesus.

- 3.9. Members of the congregation on the other hand ought to put themselves under the leadership and authority of the shepherds that Jesus has placed over them. When church members don’t listen to their pastors when they speak to them in matters of the soul, they put a burden upon their pastor’s ministry. I have to confess that this lack of submission on the part of members has become more and more of a burden on me. You call the inactive member and he sees your number on his caller ID, and he ignores you. One such man in my parish was used to calling me, “Preach.” He thought he was being cute. He was only disrespectful of the office of the ministry. *“That would be no advantage to you,”* the writer to the Hebrews admonishes.

- 3.10. Personally when I feel that burden of ministry that comes from people in my own parish who do not respect me or the Word, I go out and visit my shut-ins. They receive me with joy. They love the Word I bring them and respect me for it. They tell me that they pray for me every day and I believe they really do. In a still small voice God lets me know that there are still seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.
- 3.11. A disciple is not above his master. Remember that in your ministry! A disciple is not above his master. If they hated Jesus for speaking the truth they will hate you, too. One of the real “revelations” of the book of Revelation is in chapter 11. There Jesus pictures the visible church and the invisible church with the temple and its courtyard. The scary mystery revealed in this chapter is that the church would persecute the Church. The comfort in this chapter is that God will make sure there are always those who will proclaim the truth until the end of time. When you are being troubled by the very people you have been called to serve, do not lose heart. Do not forget the faithful remnant who love the Word and love you for it. Do not forget the seven thousand! This is God’s Church and God has called you to be ministers in it!

4. Ministers of the gospel serve a gathering of believers in a partnership or fellowship that is based on the Word of God.

- 4.1. We are often misunderstood and often maligned for our doctrine of church fellowship. It is important that we teach this clearly and often to our people. I do not believe in the Wisconsin Synod. I love her dearly and cannot imagine serving in another church body. But I do not believe in her. I believe in the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. When I teach the doctrine of fellowship to someone, I always begin with the Holy Christian Church. I use a simple line drawing to illustrate what the Bible teaches.



Paul gives a beautiful description of the Church in Ephesians 2. Even Jews and Gentiles are one in Christ. He reconciled them both to God through Christ. Jesus' death made peace with God and established peace between every Christian. *"He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit."* Ephesians 2:17-18

- 4.2. Then Paul gives us this wonderful description of the Holy Christian Church.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²²And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. Ephesians 2:18-22

Do you notice how Paul speaks about this wonderful Church as if he could actually see a real building, a real temple? He does see it - by faith. More importantly he sees the foundation and the cornerstone of the Church, which are visible. Wherever God's Word is preached and Jesus is taught to be the Savior you will find believers. God's Church is there.

- 4.3. This is not a description of the Wisconsin Synod but of all believers in every church where the Gospel is present in Word and Sacrament and Jesus is taught to be the Savior. In the visible church we cannot see faith. We can only see the confession that we make as to what God's Word teaches. We can only see what we teach and what we confess. It does not benefit the Church when churches ignore what the Bible teaches and pretend that unity exists in the visible church where it does not. Shall we throw out the Scriptures so we can pretend to be one in doctrine? This is what the ecumenical movement has done and we can see the result in our generation. No doctrine is sacred any more.
- 4.4. This may indeed look good to our humanistic sinful nature, this holding of hands and singing together in a show of unity. It does not build the Church. It does not grow the unity of the Church. Without the Word of God, there is no unity but only the pretense of it. In 1 Corinthians 1: 10 Paul speaks to a Christian congregation troubled by divisions caused both by personalities and by false doctrine. What did he say? Did he tell them that they must be tolerant of each other? No. This is what he said.

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹Corinthians : 10

A literal translation of this verse would say that "all of you speak the same things." This is what unity in the Church is. It is not agreeing to disagree. It is speaking and teaching the same things. And when we examine what our brother teaches, and there is no agreement, what shall we do?

I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.
Romans 16:17

Please notice that it is not teaching the true Word of God which causes divisions but teaching false doctrine.

- 4.5. I do not believe in the Wisconsin Synod but I love this church dearly. Someday if she teaches false doctrine, I may have to leave her, but it is not today. I am daily thankful that we have agreement among us as to what the Bible teaches. I rejoice when I can make up a call list and not wonder if one of these men is going to teach false doctrine. It thrills me to see my daughter and her husband teaching in the Dominican Republic, knowing a faithful shepherd is teaching them the true Word of God. I have sent my children to Lutheran grade schools and high schools and I have never feared that they were being led down a path of false doctrine.

¹ *How good and pleasant it is
when brothers live together in unity!*
² *It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down upon the collar of his robes.*
³ *It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the LORD bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore. (Psalm 133)*

- 4.6. Paul's letter to the Philippians focuses on that partnership or fellowship in the gospel. It is something into which God has called us and into which we grow daily as we grow in the Word.

I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. **Philippians 1:3-6**

This partnership in the gospel is also something which affects the way we live and work in this fellowship of believers.

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. **Philippians 2: 1-4**

What follows is Paul's wonderful song in which he holds up Jesus as the one who thought only of us and made himself a servant for us.

- 4.7. Brothers, if we are brothers in faith and one in confession, then let's live and work together as brothers! Paul tells us to be like-minded. Do you want to have a staff which respects each other and which truly works as one? Then get them into the Word together – regularly and often. When you filter your thinking through the Word of God, you may have different opinions, but you will share the same spirit and purpose. God's Word will unite you and shape you and make you one. After all, didn't God's Word give a platform for even Jews and Gentiles to become one in Christ?

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.” Ephesians 2: 19-21

- 4.8. God's Word is the platform from which we work together for the good of the kingdom and for building up the church of God. I have an associate who is very different from me. We do not think the same way in very many things. I have sometimes found it difficult to come to a decision in our staff meetings on how our church is going to conduct its ministry. Most often, we end up either doing it his way or my way. There is seldom an “our” way. In some churches these conflicts are resolved in business-like fashion. When the church across the street called a new head pastor the rest of the staff was terminated and he brought in his own people. I suppose that this is what you must resort to when you do not agree in the Word.
- 4.9. My associate and I may not always agree on how we will approach certain things, but there has never been a question in either of our minds that we are one in faith and doctrine. We are united in spirit and purpose. We have a partnership in the gospel that is precious. We cultivate it as we study the Word together in our staff meetings. We learn from each other as we apply the truths of Scripture to the many questions of casuistry which arise. An hour ago, as I was writing the paragraph above, he came into my office and shared that a member repented and moved up the marriage to next week instead of next year. We rejoiced together with the angels in heaven over one sinner who repented. How good it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!
- 4.10. Paul's words to the Philippians encourage us to *“do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.”* Isn't this the real source of most conflict between ministers of the gospel? We let our sinful nature get in the way. We think we are always right. We want it to be done our way or no way at all. We are jealous when someone else gets a little more glory, or even a little more pay. We sometimes act like the husbands and wives who come to our office. There is no reason they couldn't get along if they wanted to. We know the answer, don't we? “Just act like a servant in your house instead of wanting things your way and your marriage will flourish.” The same is true in ministry. Just act like servants and the

gospel ministry will flourish. “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus ...”

¹ *How good and pleasant it is
when brothers live together in unity!*
² *It is like precious oil poured on the head,
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down upon the collar of his robes.*
³ *It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the LORD bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore. (Psalm 133)*

- 4.11. I cannot imagine serving in a better church body than the Wisconsin Synod. For all her weaknesses and failings we really do walk together, and it is a joy to do it. I love the Wisconsin Synod but I do not believe in her. I believe in the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.
- 4.12. I believe in the Holy Christian Church because it will stand until the end of time. I believe in it because everyone in the Holy Christian Church is united in faith now and forever. It is an invisible tie that I can only believe in now, a tie that I will experience only in heaven. I long for that day. I had a neighbor in my first parish. He was a lay missionary for the Baptist church and our children played together. We talked often under the tree about our faith – what we shared and what made us different. He once told me that when he was a missionary in the Philippines he never had any altar calls. “I just preached the Word and preached the Word and let the Holy Spirit do his work.” It surprised me that what he actually believed was more Lutheran than Baptist. Still we were separated by the teaching of Baptism. For this reason he would never dream of inviting me to speak in his church. Nor would I have invited him to ours. These conversations were important – because it helped me see that those who didn’t bow the knee to Baal didn’t all belong to the WELS. It also gave me a chance to confess to him the truth about Baptism. Should we only correct and rebuke those who are one with us in our confession of faith? Or should we speak to those who are separated from us as well? I think we can find opportunities to do both.
- 4.13. I belong to our local ministerial association. It is a loosely-gathered group and I do not believe that I have compromised my confession in doing so. That cannot be said for every such group. About once every five years or so I explain to the group why I can’t do the Lenten series with them or the baccalaureate service. I draw my picture. I want them to know that I BELIEVE in the communion of saints. I show them in the picture that what builds and unites God’s Church is the Word. What divides it is false teaching. I explain to them that Jesus commanded me to teach EVERYTHING that he commanded us. If I am in an ecumenical service, can I teach about infant baptism? The proper understanding of the Lord’s Supper? If I must refrain from teaching these doctrines, then I would not be faithful to Jesus’ command to teach everything that he commanded us (Matthew 28:19). They didn’t kick me out of the ministerial association. In fact the

chairman thanked me a couple of years ago for representing the WELS in the group. He added, "For your sake I don't begin or end our meeting with prayer, because that would be difficult for you."

- 4.14. Scripturally is it proper for ministers to have these conversations with those who do not agree with us? Paul said, *"I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them."* **Romans 16:17** *"Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him."* **Titus 3:10** Does this mean we should walk on the other side of the street from them? Should we not speak to our neighbor at all? I worked closely with Ron Uhlhorn in the Minnesota District. When we talked about the application of fellowship principles he was fond of quoting Professor Meyer at the seminary. Those were the years that the fellowship controversy was hotly debated in the seminary classrooms. It was not uncommon for the students to ask the professor if it was o.k. to pray with your grandmother in the Missouri Synod. This guaranteed that at least half the class period would be spent in the same discussion you had in the previous class. The result was that you would have less preparation for the next day. In one such ploy, Prof. Meyer said, "Gentlemen, we cannot answer every question of casuistry. When you are confronted with these matters, just remember to make your confession clear." We speak the truth in love. We make our confession clear.
- 4.15. But do we always speak the truth in love? I have heard some of us, and have at times been guilty of, speaking of pastors in other church bodies in the most derogatory terms. If some pastors in the ELCA deny creation and the resurrection, is it fair and loving for us to accuse every pastor of being guilty for doing so? Isn't this breaking the 8th Commandment? I have heard a brother talk about the "she-pastors" in other church bodies. (I don't know that I can mimic the derision in his voice.) Does this make us feel so much more superior? Do we get a perverse pleasure when we see how Satan has infiltrated the visible church? Shouldn't we instead weep and mourn that God's people are afflicted and tempted with false doctrine in every corner?
- 4.16. I had a heart attack in July. The following week two ELCA pastors called me and told me that they were praying for me. The Assemblies' pastor sent me flowers and prayed for my recovery. I don't believe they were expressing their oneness with me in the gospel, only their concern for someone in the Christian Church who was hurting. Would I have done the same? Would it compromise our confession to do so? I don't think so. Jesus taught us to pray even for those who persecute us (Mt 5:44). I think we can be good neighbors to people in our community that are hurting. It may give us an opportunity to make our confession clear to those who need to hear what God's Word says.
- 4.17. *How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!* If you attended our music conference this year you had a taste of how wonderful it is to minister in a church in which God's Word is taught in its truth and purity. In one of the liturgies just two little words were missed in one of the liturgical sections that could be understood as false doctrine. You could almost feel the crowd's nervousness. The next day one of the

worship leaders apologized deeply for the slip. We guard our doctrine that closely in the WELS! This is how God preserves the unity among us. In the closing service of that conference, you would have had the chance to sing *Jerusalem the Golden* with the Thaxsted melody. The music and the mood of the conference took you to the gates of heaven and let your peek inside to imagine the joys that wait us there, the radiance of glory, the bliss beyond compare. Then the doors closed and left your praying for Jesus to come again soon. *How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!*

Brothers, God has called you to serve in his Church in a difficult time and in a very important time. He has called you to serve as pastors and teachers and professors and staff ministers and in a host of different ways in which ministers serve. He has not called you to serve alone but at the head of an army of believers who have been empowered to go in Jesus' name to preach the gospel. He has called you and gifted you to lead his people and to watch over them. This service which you perform in Jesus' Church is a high and honorable calling. What a great privilege it is to be servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God! Your calling is especially important in this time, when the visible church is filled with those who no longer regard God's Word as holy! It is a difficult time and Satan is attacking God's Church both from without and from within the visible church on earth. We know why Satan is working so hard. "*He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.*" ^{Revelation 12:12} We must also work, because "*night is coming, when no man can work.*" ^{John 9:4} Jesus' coming will mark the end of Satan's work and ours. His work will be destroyed, but ours will remain. So go forth in boldness and with a clear confession, confident that in the end, the **devil never wins.**

Rev. Charles F. Degner

A Reaction to *The Church and Its Ministers* by Pastor Charles F. Degner

Thank you, Pastor Degner, for this paper. We also thank the Lord, not only that he gave you the ability to produce this paper, but for the strength to come here and present it to us as well. Neither were foregone conclusions this summer. Pastor Degner mentions his July heart attack at the end of his paper. It was a very serious event, and the Lord's will for his recovery was not immediately clear. I'm sure that Paul's words in the first chapter of Philippians came to the minds of Pastor Degner and those who prayed for his recovery: *"I am torn between the two. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body."* We rejoice that the Lord in his eternal wisdom declared it to be good that Pastor/District President Degner remain with us for the foreseeable future and that he continue to serve us with his many gifts.

In his covering email when he sent his paper, Pastor Degner wrote: "You will notice that there are not a lot of endnotes and footnotes. This was not because I didn't read extensively for this paper. I attended a free conference once on the role of men and women, which was predominantly attended by LCMS pastors. In six hours the pertinent passages were never discussed. I also believe that quoting Luther or Walther or others without a full understanding of their times and history is dangerous. I would rather study the Scriptures and apply them to our own time." In the paper Pastor Degner accomplished his stated purpose well.

I read with amused interest about Pastor Degner's walk with his Uncle Erwin. Professor Erwin Schroeder was also my Latin teacher, and eventually became my father-in-law. I can just imagine that in his one divorce case he "went over there and straightened them out." If Professor Schroeder looked at that couple the way he looked at the unprepared student in his classroom who was praying that he not be called on, I can well imagine that they changed their minds quickly and promised never even to consider the matter again. Maybe that is why he never had any more cases to deal with either.

I would like to make the following comments about the paper itself. I can appreciate the thoughts to which the essayist gives expression in his introduction. The practice of all forms of public ministry today, including the parish ministry, is difficult. The problems are overwhelming, the opportunities unique. I would just add that the Lord's servants of every era of the church have rightfully thought so about their own peculiar age. The challenges that the world presents have always been immense. Satan's attacks have always been severe. A comfort to us is that the Lord was with his church when its members thought that it would surely perish. It is no different for us in this age.

Section 1

This section was devoted to the scriptural truth that all believers have the keys and have the responsibility and privilege to use them. I especially liked the essayist's emphases in 1.12 where he said that the Church has the keys because the believers which make it up have the keys not the other way around, and 1.14 where he comments on what it means to be a lay (l a0~) person.

I think the essayist did a good job of keeping his use of the word "ministry" in context throughout the paper. In 1.14 he reminds us "Please note that we are still talking about our ministry as believers, not as those who have been called by believers." The term ministry can apply to both, of course, but it is easy to be unclear. I understood what the essayist was talking about much better than I understand what I am singing about in CW566, "We All Are One in Mission, We All Are One in Call." Perhaps part of the reason for the clarity in this paper is that while the term "ministry" is used when referring to the universal priesthood, the term "call" is not.

In section 1.9 the essayist mentions the "nuance of the word picture Jesus uses... It is the devil in the fortress and he is trembling when God's people attack his kingdom with the gospel." Though it is true that Satan is bound and his powers are limited by Christ's victory and the preaching of the Gospel, many commentators understand the phrase "gates of Hades" (NIV) in this verse as standing for the powers of Satan which pour forth from the depths of hell and attack Christ's kingdom on earth.

I close the comments on Section 1 by noting that the essayist uses a number of passages to draw out Scripture's teaching on the priesthood of all believers. One verse I like in addition is 1 Peter 4:10, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."

Section 2

The paper laid out clearly what the public ministry is that the assembled church calls certain individuals to perform. The essayist reminded us that although God has instituted the public ministry, the forms may change as the needs of the church require. The Lord has not left us with a manual of rules. Nor ought we to consider the parish ministry in the form that it exists among us today as the *sine qua non* of public ministry (the *Predigtamt*).

I appreciated the study of the various forms of ministry mentioned by Paul in Ephesians 4, and the essayist's admission that we cannot exactly equate those forms with forms we have today. I will always remember the times I attend meetings of the Michigan District back in the 1970s. Every time a report or a speaker mentioned the two categories, pastors and missionaries or evangelists, the sainted Pastor Win Koelpin would stand up and remind us that pastors are missionaries and evangelists too.

Sections 2.14 through 2.19 are deserving of our attention today. In 2.14 Pastor Degner speaks about how a congregation ought to revere its pastor. "If Quasimodo were standing in the pulpit, preaching the Word of God in a droning voice, I should listen in rapt attention because one of God's ministers is bringing me to the feet of Jesus and I am listening to the Word!" Later in 2.18 he says, "What if that teacher is capable of discipline in a single class and not in a multiple classroom setting? How will this be resolved?" And 2.19, "It is not so hard to resolve these issues about the Church and its ministers if both the people of the church and the ministers whom it has called approach these difficult times with their new man and not their sinful nature."

Unfortunately, the “should” and the “if” in these statements are often ignored. There are a number of examples in our synod of congregations who have complained that members are leaving and new members are not coming (and it might be true) because their pastor is a Quasimodo. His preaching and Bible classes drive them away, not because they contain false doctrine, but because of the way they are delivered. Such a pastor may be asked to resign, “for the good of the Gospel,” even if he does not want to. Pastors and teachers have been asked to resign because they do not relate well enough to the people they are serving. Members will leave, or parents will withdraw their children from the school if changes are not made. Do we just admit that the relationship established by the call has been destroyed and ask the called worker to leave, if we cannot provide him with another, more suitable call? I wish I was wise enough to do more than just raise the questions. Perhaps our discussion to follow will provide more insight from DPs who are here and other called workers who have greater insight than I do.

I have no comment but to note that although most, if not all, of our students express their willingness to serve anywhere, 2.17 points out that that doesn’t always hold true when the rubber meets the road on Call Day.

Section 3

The thought occurred to me in connection with 3.9 that maybe we should be more assertive in demanding respect from those we are called to serve when they show an obvious disrespect for the office of the ministry. Paul did so, not to defend or seek honor for himself, but so that his apostleship might not be dishonored.

I appreciated the way Pastor Degner discussed the doctrine of the church and at the same time defended and applied the scriptural teachings on fellowship. He made it clear that we believe in the Holy Christian Church, and that it is not to be identified with the WELS or any other visible church body. We thank God that through the means of grace he has and continues to bring his elect into his kingdom, even in the heterodox churches that surround us. But for now we must be satisfied with a narrower fellowship within the visible church and thank God for the considerable blessings that even such a limited fellowship brings to God’s people.

Pastor Degner, thank you again for your paper and the instruction and encouragement which it brings. May the Lord grant you continued health and many more years of fruitful service in our synod’s kingdom work.

Respectfully submitted,
James Westendorf
September 23, 2008