

THE DISTRICT PRESIDENTS: WE CAN HELP THEM

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Preface

I would like to thank all the present and former district presidents who responded to my questionnaire with many thoughtful and thought provoking observations. I would also like to acknowledge the many laymen who sent in their observations and opinions concerning their respective district presidents. Many of their thoughts are quoted in the essay and still many others are simply referred to. Even so, I could not find the time or the space to address all of the aspects of the office of district president which they referred to. In rereading the essay, I realize that I failed to give proper acknowledgment to the wives and families of the district presidents. Without their quiet and faithful service, the district presidents could not serve the church as they do. We as a church owe thanks to God for the wives and families who serve the church more than we can realize by supporting and assisting their husbands and fathers in their work.

District Presidents: We Can Help Them

It has been said in this generation that there are very few heroes, very few people whom we can honestly look up to and genuinely respect. As evidence of this, people cite the growing lack of integrity, honesty, faithfulness, and other virtues among both the general society and, especially, among our public figures. It is a sad truth that God-fearing integrity and faithfulness has become a rare commodity even among our leaders. However, we of the Wisconsin Synod can be eminently thankful to God that we do have leaders whom we can genuinely respect and look up to. We can and ought to thank God that we have a number of God-fearing, faithful leaders who teach us God's Word both through their words and their examples.

It was my privilege last year to serve as vicar under one such leader, Pastor Gerald Free, the President of our Nebraska District. During this year I became acquainted with the office of the District President and learned to appreciate the work that our District Presidents carry out. As I became acquainted with the office and the work involved both within and without the home congregation, it became evident that we as a Synod could do something to help our District Presidents. The combination of a fulltime parish call and the office of the District President appeared at times to call for almost superhuman endurance and

abilities. There were more than a few times when I was simply amazed at the amount of work Pastor Free carried out.

Therefore, in a spirit of thankfulness to God for the dedicated leaders he has given us, and with a desire to illustrate how we can help our leaders in their callings, I am writing this essay on the Office of the District President.

I. Brief History

The office of the District President as we know it has been in existence in our Synod since 1917. In that year, "our old German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and other states met for the last time from the 11th to the 17th of July, in St. Matthew's Church, Milwaukee".¹ The formerly separate synods of Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan merged at that time to become the "Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and Other States." This newly formed synod then divided itself into eight districts: Minnesota, Michigan, Nebraska, Dakota-Montana, Pacific Northwest, Northern Wisconsin, Southern Wisconsin and Western Wisconsin.² Each of these districts had a District President whose basic responsibilities were similar to the responsibilities of our present District Presidents.

One such president was Pastor F. Soll, the District President of the Pacific-Northwest District. Pastor Soll went to Grace Church, Yakima in 1912 and in 1917 became our first District President in the far west. He was an older man at the time and his experience was very much a stabilizing influence on the young missionaries and their churches in Washington. The writer of The History of the Pacific-Northwest District says:

"Officials in Wisconsin asked him to lend his efforts toward keeping the Wisconsin Synod's work in the far west within the bounds of conservative Lutheranism.... Pastor Soll rendered valuable service in the western mission field for many years. A young and inexperienced Seminary graduate whose first call brought him from Wisconsin to the far west could benefit much from his mature counsel and advice."3

An example of his mature counsel and advice appeared in the "Evangelist", December, 1918. President Soll addressed the congregations and missions concerning the depressing lack of workers in the district. He encouraged them in this way:

"Our district is in great distress.... There is a scarcity of pastors and students, and our district has the drawback of great distance. First of all, you members, help us pray to the Lord of the harvest that He send laborers.... Have patience if services are few and far between.... Meanwhile, you members, do not remain idle...if your public services cannot be conducted often enough, arrange reading services. Also read your Bible at home.... Keep up the Sunday School and feed the little lambs of Christ. Make use of your church papers, the Northwestern Lutheran and the Gemeindeblatt...

If a minister is speedily needed...please let me know, and I shall try to come or send one of our pastors."⁴

Pastor Soll remained president of the district from 1918 to 1938 and continued guiding and leading his young district.

Pastor William Lueckel was another president of that same district and Pastor E. H. Zimmerman writes concerning President Lueckel's valuable admonition and encouragement in the Word of God:

"All who have been privileged to know him and to work with him through the years certainly have been made aware of his stabilizing influence in the dark as well as in the bright days. He has always been an ardent student of the Word of God. We do not hesitate to recognize him as a treasured gift from God."⁵

District Presidents in general have been best known among their co-workers as pastors who encourage, lead and give God-fearing counsel to the people of their districts. This role of leader and counselor has been especially important in the smaller districts where a greater number of young pastors in relation to experienced pastors serve. Another example is President Wm. F. Sauer of the Dakota-Montana District, who is remembered in this way: "The membership grew numerically and even more so spiritually under his leadership. Whether in conferences or in private, his contact with young pastors could only help them. He took a fatherly interest in their work."⁶

Sometimes, of course, it was necessary for them to defend the Truth against any false doctrine that might invade their particular district. In fact, the present constitution of the Synod still states that maintaining and strengthening unity in doctrine and practice within the district is the foremost duty of the District President. An example of the District President's duty to discipline can be seen already in the Fort Atkinson Case of the 1920's. The 1926 W. Wisconsin District Convention passed a resolution declaring that all District Presidents by virtue of their election to office were empowered to deal conclusively with protestors.⁷

In later years, the District Presidents were in the forefront of the heart-rending split with the Missouri Synod. It was their job to try to keep unity in the district while the Synod dealt with the Missouri Synod. This turned out to be a very difficult and even impossible job in some cases since there were many who felt Synod should have broken with the Missouri Synod years before we actually did. The 1959 Synod Convention expressed its concern in this difficult situation by resolving:

"That a letter be drafted by the COP and conveyed...to every pastor, teacher and congregation of the Wisconsin Synod; said letter to plead in a loving spirit...to preserve the bond of fellowship and to consult with the District President before acting."⁸

The District President has always been a very important office in our Synod, and the purpose of these few examples of past District Presidents and their duties is to show this very important role which they have played throughout our Synod's history. They have encouraged young struggling districts to grow and carry out The Great Commission even in the most difficult of times. They have helped many young candidates with shaky knees grow into solid, faithful pastors. They have fought for the truth of God's Word at the grass roots level in their own churches and districts. As our Synod has grown older and bigger, they have truly been in the forefront of our efforts to preach the Gospel to all nations.

II. Change in Recent Years

Since the break with the Missouri Synod about 25 years ago, the Wisconsin Synod has grown tremendously both in numbers of people and in the geographical area which it covers. The 1970's were especially fertile years of growth. For example, between the years 1973 and 1983 the number of communicants increased by 10.9% from 283,885 to 314,792. In that same period, there was a fifteen percent increase in the number of congregations from 1019 to 1172. The number of active pastors jumped a whopping 27.9% from 816 to 1044. There are now over 1250 active pastors listed in the

1985 Synod Yearbook. The number of elementary teachers increased in that same 10 year span by more than 38% to 1608 teachers. The greatest increase, however, has been in the area over which our Synod is spread. We now have churches in all fifty states compared to less than twenty only twenty years ago.

All this growth translates into a tremendous growth in the responsibilities of the District Presidents, although the basic duties remain the same. The Synod Constitution in section 305 (c) defines the duties of the District Presidents:

"The duties of the Conference of Presidents shall be to maintain and strengthen unity in doctrine and practice in the various districts of the Synod; to supervise the funding of the Synod's budget; to exchange information and counsel relative to the most advantageous placement of pastors, professors, and teachers; to make proper disposition of such matters as the Synod may refer to it....(h)...They shall also convene as the Synodical Assignment Committee."

These duties, in essence, remain the same as 25 years ago, but because of the growth of Synod they have increased greatly in magnitude. There are many more miles to cover to get to all the new churches. There are many more young pastors and teachers with whom to work and counsel. There are more high schools and grade schools in each district. There are more assignments to make and more calls for which they are responsible. There is more correspondence and more counseling than

ever before. What's even more, the Synod budget whose funding they supervise, is well over \$13 million per year. Certainly the job has grown!

Not only has the sheer size of our Synod increased the workload of the COP, but the climate of our times has also had its affects. Each District President is at the same time pastor of his own congregation, and the work at home has become more complex and demanding. One pastor commented that it seems the people today want more than simply a pastor who loves souls. They seem to want the pastor to be leader, organizer, counselor, speaker, evangelist and motivator all in one. There are more demands and this, of course, adds pressure to the parish ministry.

Another factor that can add pressure is that the average parishioner today is more educated so he or she tends to ask more questions and expect more answers. No longer is the pastor the most educated person in the congregation whom people follow without question. People tend to question and probe more before they agree with what he says. This is not in itself undesirable, but it is one more factor that can add pressure to the ministry.

Possibly one of the biggest changes in the ministry that has affected the District President is the increase in counseling cases. This doubly affects the District President because he is a counselor at both the

congregational and district levels. A major reason for this is that our lay people have been influenced by the immorality of our day. Therefore, there are more and more divorces, broken homes, drug problems, children being born out of wedlock and other problems that the pastor must deal with. These difficulties to some extent are affecting the District President's home congregation and necessitating special pastoral care and counseling at home.

These same problems are also surfacing among our called workers. Our pastors, teachers and their families are not exempt from the troubles of this world and they, too, are being infected by the attitudes and lifestyles of the day. Consequently, there is an increasing number of troubled homes and ministries among our called workers. Therefore, the District Presidents are experiencing a growing number of counseling cases at the district level.

Why are these problems that require special attention increasing among our called workers? Some District Presidents cite a number of reasons. One obvious reason is that we are children of our times and have been infected at least to some extent by the immorality of our society. Our called workers are being tempted daily and some have succumbed.

Another reason for more troubles among our called workers is the simple fact that we have more workers.

In addition to that, the majority of our pastors have 10 or less years of experience. This larger and relatively youthful ministerium is requiring more time from our District Presidents.

One interesting observation that veteran pastors see as a cause of difficulties within both parsonages and teacherages is the growing number of workers and spouses with varying backgrounds. Our workers and their spouses are not only coming from solid two parent Lutheran homes, but an increasing number are also coming from troubled homes, non-Lutheran homes and even non-religious homes. Consequently, they don't have a real foreknowledge of the ministry and adjustments to the ministry both for the worker and the spouse are often difficult. A former District President writes, "Yes, there are problems in the parsonages and teacherages, especially in the far-flung districts... mothers working, wives not of Lutheran background, wives can't cope with loneliness.... More counseling necessary." In addition, willingness to serve is sometimes lessened by the called worker's or the spouse's variant views of the ministry. This, of course, can cause problems in the congregations and the District President is ultimately responsible for the parishes in his district.

Certainly the ministry in general and especially the ministries of our leaders have become more complex

and difficult. The District President's office, which in itself is already a double ministry, has become doubly difficult. The result is a tremendous amount of work and the people of our Synod have recognized this fact. Therefore, the 1981 Synod Convention adopted this resolution:

"to appoint a study commission to examine thoroughly the administrative structure of the Synod on both the district and synodical levels."

The major reason given for this resolution reads as follows:

Whereas 1) certain part-time administrators, particularly District Presidents, do experience work overloads.⁹

Before proceeding any further, permit me to emphasize Whereas #7 of the same resolution: "The Coordinating Council has suggested that such a study could best be done at a time when there is little pressure for immediate change." At present there is little pressure for change simply because the District Presidents and other leaders have responded amazingly well to increased duties. They have served faithfully and quietly and have provided effective leadership even as our Synod has grown. Again, sincere thanks to God for these faithful servants is certainly in order.

III. How the District Presidency Affects the Pastor

The question which we need to ask, however, is:

How does the Office of the District Presidency affect the pastor? They are undoubtedly very busy men. Twelve to fifteen hour days, seven days a week are not unusual. The amount of time spent solely on district matters may range from approximately one day per week to nearly one half of their total work. One former District President said in reference to the amount of time spent on district work:

"I can't give an exact percentage. I did that one year, but it was very frustrating to think about it. Some weeks it may be 90% district business. There is much thought time going on in the office. The office is with you 100% of the time."

An example of a District President's week during the spring might begin by leaving home on Sunday, then spending three or four days and a couple of evenings in meetings. When Thursday arrives, he will return home to prepare Bible class, a possible sermon, and the bulletin for Sunday. Add to that the stack of mail that has accumulated through the week, confirmation class, hospital visits, shut-in visits, possible counseling and time for the family. One begins to realize why the Administration Survey Commission says District Presidents are experiencing work overloads.

How does this affect the District President as pastor? Obviously, he learns to cut corners simply because there isn't enough time to do everything. Where does he cut corners? One District President says,

"I try very hard not to permit district responsibilities to interfere with sermon preparations, Bible class study, or calling on the sick and shut-in. I have given up free time and vacation time rather than short-change the congregation."

It seems apparent that the first corner that any of the District Presidents cut is in their own personal free time. They regularly work extra hours and yet, as another District President says, "the time involved simply takes its toll." There are times when there is simply not enough time to prepare, and different laymen have observed that they can tell when the pastor hasn't had the time to properly prepare a sermon or Bible class.

Besides giving up personal free time, the District Presidents learn to cut where it hurts the congregation the least and has the least noticeable effects. Thus, evangelism calls, calls on prospects, class preparation and/or family may suffer. Thankfully, though, they have learned to juggle their time well enough so that very few negative effects are seen in their congregations or families. In fact, just the opposite appears to be true.

On the whole, their congregations are healthy and active and their families are also fine examples of Christian homes. It seems worth noting that many present and former District Presidents have had several children who have entered or who are studying for the public

ministry. The Mischke, Free, Mueller, Zarling, Voss, Berg, Nitz, Bitter and Beckmann families all have children who have made the public ministry their choice of profession. Obviously, these present and former District Presidents have portrayed ministries that are joyous, rewarding and God-pleasing. If they did not, their children would be very hesitant to follow in their footsteps. Certainly the Lord has blessed their labors.

One negative effect the District Presidents feel is frustration. They see many things that they cannot do which they would like to. While they are away on district work, certain things must be put on hold. The vicars and congregation members do help very much, but they can't always replace the frustrating thought, "I wish I could be there." Our District Presidents are men with very high personal goals and expectations. Therefore, it's very difficult for them to constantly be forced to do only what is necessary to get by in the time allowed.

Nevertheless, the District Presidents enjoy their work. They consider it a privilege to serve in this special way. One man says:

"I have had a number of experiences which, I believe, have rounded out my ministry. That's difficult to illustrate, but suffice it to say that attending COP meetings and seeing things from the inside has been quite a learning experience which

has been to my advantage and consequently, of benefit to the congregation."

Another District President once expressed how the reward of serving far outweighed his troubles or difficulties. He said:

"What's wrong with being tired? Everybody gets tired. Our time on this earth is short and the Lord has given us the opportunity and the privilege to spread His Word while we are here. He will give us plenty of time to rest in the mansions of heaven."

IV. How the Office Affects the Home Congregation

The District Presidents enjoy their office, but what do their members think of his office? How do they feel if affects the congregation? There are a number of positive effects that different laymen cited.

Many laymen mention that there is a special pride in having a pastor who is also a District President. They have a real feeling that a pastor must be a good pastor if he is selected by his peers. "It may not be the best of logic," as one man says, "but it is a real feeling."

Members also appreciate the information that the District President brings to his congregation. There is a definite image problem in our Synod insofar as many congregations speak of Synod in the third person. Very often our congregations refer to themselves as "we" and Synod as "they" or "those people in Milwaukee."

This problem is then exacerbated by a lack of information from the pastors or even inaccurate information. However, the information that the District Presidents bring to their congregations concerning our work as a Synod tends to lessen this "we/they" syndrome at home. The people appreciate having first-hand knowledge of their Synod, and several people mentioned that this has a positive effect on the congregation.

Somewhat related is the benefit of being more exposed to traveling choirs, visitors and guest preachers. I don't know if it's factual that the District President's congregation is more exposed to such things, but different members feel this is true and they enjoy it.

One special guest that many District Presidents' congregations welcome every year is a vicar. Believe it or not, members do enjoy having a vicar and the reason why is interesting. First of all, it is not because of the amount of work a vicar might do to save his bishop time. Neither is it because the vicar stays in town while pastor is gone. It seems the congregation simply likes to see a new face with a new way of talking. One man says, "You fellows (vicars) are also probably the major benefit to the pastors themselves--not for the work you do but for the exchange of ideas." Another man comments, "The congregation is exposed to a new vicar each

year. While the personalities and particular abilities change, their enthusiasm for work in the Lord's kingdom is consistent and a tremendous blessing." Now I'm not mentioning this in order to pat a former vicar on the back. It is apparent from these laymen's remarks that being a vicar is easy. All a vicar has to do is be new at the beginning of the year, have an idea or two for the pastor to think about, have some enthusiasm and then leave so a new face can arrive. If he does those things with a smile on his face, the people will like him.

Another interesting effect that laymen feel from being in a District President's congregation is the fact that they automatically become an example for other congregations because their pastor is a leader. One man says:

"We don't try to keep up with the Joneses, we stay ahead of the Joneses. Do we do this so that our pastor looks good? After all, can the Synod V.P.'s congregation look bad? For example, without discussion, we raised our commitment to Synod for 1984 knowing that we wouldn't even reach our original commitment.... Our teacher salaries, as low as they are, are \$100 over Synod code solely to set an example."

Another man feels that the congregation is expected to do more for Synod simply because pastor is the District President and he supports Synod strongly. I think this is basically a good effect because the people feel more compelled to support things outside of their

home churches. Nevertheless, as yet another man says, "This can feel uncomfortable at budget time."

By and large, members feel that the District Presidency is good for the congregation. However, some negative things were mentioned. For instance, the congregation may have to change a meeting date because of pastor's schedule, and "changing it can have an effect of killing zeal on the men's part because they work out their own schedule and then have everything shot down when dates are changed." Sometimes comments such as these are made, "Is pastor gone again?, I sure would like to talk to pastor about our wedding, but he always seems so busy." Very likely, because pastor works especially hard and because he usually has an associate or vicar, a District President's congregation receives as good or better than average pastoral care. Most members concur in this and say that they wouldn't change much for their own sake.

V. What Can We Do To Help

What should we then do to help our District Presidents? When we as a church ask this question, we are really asking, "How can we help each other better serve the Lord?" This, by the way, is the basic purpose of our Administration Survey Commission and it is the question I will address in the final portion of this essay. The survey commission writes:

"Our commission therefore proceeded with its work under this conviction....Our prayer is that by looking carefully at the total administrative structure of our Synod and suggesting changes...we might be used by the Lord...to help the Synod become more effective in the ministry of extending and conserving the Gospel."¹⁰

The first solution that someone might have for easing the District President's time crunch is make the office fulltime. Offhand there are some fine sounding arguments that favor a fulltime District President. "The scope of the responsibilities and the travel required demand an amount of time that exceeds the normal work week."¹¹ "The strain of having two fulltime positions could lead to poor decision making, burnout, and having the work of both the office and the congregation suffer."¹² "The District President would have more time to listen and prepare in counseling cases; problems could be dealt with more quickly and he would have more visibility in the district."¹³ Offhand these arguments in favor of a fulltime office sound viable, but a fulltime District President is really the least desirable option. I mentioned above that some in our Synod have difficulties understanding that we are all part of Synod and Synod is a vital extension of our church. I call it the we/they syndrome: "They (Synod) always want more from us." "They tell us how to raise money." "They want to send more

missionaries, so they're asking for a PBS increase." As a result, sometimes there is a feeling in congregations that expresses itself like this, "What has Synod ever done for us?"

If we were to make the Office of the District President fulltime, we would only add another piece of kindling to this misguided, although, real sentiment. The last thing we as a Synod want to do is add fuel to the illusion that there are two classes of people in our Synod--our congregations and their pastors and then those guys in the offices who tell the congregations what to do. A fulltime District President could possibly be labeled as one of those guys. In addition, a fulltime District President would tend to become insulated and separated from the constantly changing ministry. He could easily lose touch with the people.

Possibly a more positive way of expressing this sentiment is the way in which many laymen and District Presidents wrote. They said that the District President should come from the trenches. When he tells congregations in his district what they should do, he is expecting nothing different from them than he does from his own congregation. The congregations and people of the district look upon him as another pastor who cares for and works with his own congregation. Therefore, they tend to

respect him first as a pastor and then as a District President. If the office were made fulltime, this respect could be turned around and the people would see him as another office holder.

Closely related is the image the District President has with fellow pastors. Right now he cannot expect other pastors to do what he does not do as a pastor himself. It has long been observed in private industry that the workers are more willing to work for a boss who knows what they're doing and also gets his hands dirty just like they do. For instance, GM foremen are required to know and to be able to do all the jobs of the workers they oversee. In addition, the ones who know the most and work most closely with the workers are the most respected. If the District Presidency were made fulltime, the District President would lose a vital link to good communication and respected authority within his district.

Another consideration is the fact that people tend to fill up the time that is allowed to do a certain job. If someone has two hours, he tends to take two hours to do a job even though he could finish it in one hour. If we have a fulltime District President, would he actually do more, or would he tend to fill up his time with no real increase in effectiveness? One very busy District President

said that he would be busy fulltime for about three months, but after that he would have to look for things to do to fill up his time.

What then should we do to help our District Presidents? Information, organization and time management seem to be the areas in which we could help them the most. Congregations whose pastors are District Presidents are often unaware of the scope of their pastor's workload. In that regard, a layman suggests that the District President annually review his duties with the congregation (council, elders, etc.) and discuss how the pastor and congregation can work together to get the job done. He says:

"Many District Presidents have had their positions for some time. It is very easy for a congregation to take these duties for granted. The duties are too critical to allow this to happen. Perhaps a standard letter or brochure could be prepared and sent to those congregations with a District President or other office to help them better understand the importance of the position and the need to help out."

In this regard, congregations could also set up one, three, five or even ten year goals. A specific plan would help them define what exactly they as a church want to accomplish. Then when their pastor becomes District President or takes on any other outside office, an adaptation of their plans could be implemented to deal with the new situation.

Organization is another area in which we could help our District Presidents. Here I am thinking of the office work involved. A secretary and certain office equipment ought to be automatic with the job. One District President has his wife do his secretarial work. Another one has a lady who types his correspondence, but either he must take it to her home across town or she must pick it up before she can type. Another District President had his vicar do his office work and yet another does all his own. Lest we think this is a small thing, Pastor Free's daily correspondence averages six to ten letters a day. In addition, there are over 1200 pastors and 1600 teachers in our Synod whom they must constantly keep track of for call lists and calls. Certainly a trusted, knowledgeable secretary and up-to-date equipment such as a computer would do much to ease the daily office work. The District President would then have more time for his ministry rather than office work for which others are better qualified.

Closely related to organization of the office work, is time management. We could help our District Presidents by teaching them how to use their time wisely. Private business knows that time is money so their executives attend seminars and take classes on the wise use of all their resources. They are taught how to use

profitably and efficiently the people and other resources available to them. Private business spends money to make their executives cost-efficient. We, too, would do well to spend some money on our District Presidents to help them become more cost-efficient executives. They try to use their circuit pastors and other district officials to the best of their abilities, but they have been ^{trained} as pastors, not executives. Their time is a precious commodity and we ought to help them save it.

A final way in which we could help our District Presidents is simply to limit the duties specified to them. With the increase of committees and the growth of Synod, the COP has found itself involved in a number of extra duties and committees. The Administration Survey Commission observes:

"Injudicious application by the Synod of the last point under "c" in Section 3.05 as well as injudicious employment of this point by other duly constituted boards and commissions tends to make out of the COP a body it was never intended to be, and contributes to the unrealistic work load the District Presidents are called upon to bear."¹⁴

Therefore, the Administration Survey Commission has suggested that the primary duties of the District President be: maintain and strengthen unity of doctrine and practice in their district; supervise funding of the budget; exchange information and counsel concerning the placement of our called workers; and

function as the Synod's Assignment Committee.¹⁵ This limiting of duties, if approved by Synod, would help lessen the amount of committees and boards the District Presidents become appointed to. It would also enable them to concentrate better on their main job.

Another limitation awaiting approval by Synod is to make the District President ineligible for the Synod's Praesidium. Up until now, different District Presidents have also served as Synod Vice Presidents, thus increasing their duties. The different districts in their conventions have already approved this limitation and final approval by Synod will very likely come this summer in Saginaw.

In conclusion, we can thankfully say that we have some very talented and faithful leaders in our Synod. It is my prayer that we as a church can continue to benefit from their services. I also pray that we make wise use of the talents God has given our church and help our leaders to serve as joyfully and profitably as possible. At the same time, we can be confident that whatever the organizational structure is that we have, the Lord will provide the needed talents and manpower.

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