

Duties Of The Vacancy Pastor

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Part One: The Call of the Vacancy Pastor

According to the Word and command of the Lord Jesus, the ministry of the Keys is entrusted to his Church on earth, Mt 18:18. The ministry of reconciliation belongs to all Christians, 1 Pe 2:9; Mk 16:15. A Christian pastor then assists the members of a congregation in the carrying out of their ministry. He does not bring the ministry to them; they have it by virtue of their membership in Christ's Church. When it happens then that the pastorate of a congregation is vacant, the congregation still has its ministry. The Christians in that place are still to continue to function in showing forth the praises of him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light. The work of vacancy pastor is to help the congregation to continue its ministry while it is without a permanent pastor.

While the work of the church belongs to each and every Christian, yet the pastoral office is necessary in a congregation. The holy ministry is ordained by God and important for good order, 1 Co 14:40. Confusion and disintegration would result if a congregation were not to have someone chosen to publicly preach and administer the Sacraments. The word pastor means shepherd. The condition of sheep without a shepherd is a dangerous one. Especially the weak and the troubled suffer without the care and leadership of a called minister of the Word. When for any reason a vacancy develops in a pastorate of a congregation, the Christian congregation, in consultation with the District President and the Circuit Pastor elects a vacancy pastor.

As the congregation selects its vacancy pastor, it would seem wise for the District President or his representative to define with the congregation what is to be expected of the vacancy pastor and also establish what would be adequate compensation for the man. This information could then be given to the man who has been elected to serve. In the far-flung reaches of our district the usual man to be chosen is the closest pastor. The congregation should follow the direction of the District President in the selection, however. In a vacancy a man is needed who can give direction, a consciousness of responsibility, and adequate pastoral care during a vacancy. There are times when the nearest pastor, because of workload, or lack of particular gifts needed by the vacant congregation, should be passed by for the selection of another. Love for Christ and the desire for the welfare of his Kingdom would surely preclude any hurt feelings in such cases.

A phone call to the man selected to be vacancy pastor from the circuit pastor or president of the congregation to alert him that he has been called is a good thing. He should be told what will be expected of him as well as what the compensation will be. A written diploma of vocation or "Request For Services During A Vacancy" is to be sent at once to the pastor called. Such a form can be found at the end of this paper.

It seems to this writer that the calling congregation should not expect an answer at once from the man called to be vacancy pastor. Surely one would not wish to keep the vacant congregation waiting long before accepting or declining. On the other hand, this writer feels that a pastor owes it to the congregation(s) he is presently serving to discuss the request to serve a vacancy, at least with the church council, before accepting. One could think of few instances where a congregation would refuse a sister congregation the services of its pastor, yet such a discussion could promote understanding and preclude any dissatisfaction, particularly if the vacancy should become a long one.

When one accepts the call to serve as a vacancy pastor it is proper to inform the calling congregation by means of a letter.

Part Two: The Goals of the Vacancy Pastor

The goals of the vacancy pastor are no different from the goals of a permanent pastor. The vacancy pastor desires to lead as many people as possible to heaven. In addition to this, he aims to equip the saints for service to the Lord while they remain here on earth.

Instead of a period where everything stands still, or worse, goes down hill, a vacancy should be a time for new growth and a reaching for a new level of maturity for the congregation. In the book, *Calls and Vacancies*, Oscar Reinboth writes, "If the layman is the bridge over which the Gospel must pass from the sanctuary to society, if his grocery counter becomes an altar, then surely God's work of evangelizing and edifying continues in a community even after the pastor leaves the congregation. When this concept becomes a part of our theological concern and not a mouthing of mere words, a vacancy can become an enriching experience for a congregation." A vacancy is an exceptional opportunity to develop lay-leadership. Skillful direction can turn a congregation to seeing themselves as ministers of Christ. Organization and delegation of responsibility, together with proper instruction, will bring it about that there is not one servant of the Lord in a congregation but many.

There is no doubt that the vacancy pastor will strive for better organization in his own life and in that of the vacant congregation, but he dare not lose sight of the needs of individuals. He must also see to it that he allows time for personal contact with the troubled, the sick and the delinquent. In our desire for efficiency and our encouraging congregational self-sufficiency we dare never lose sight of our responsibility of being the comforter of souls, Ac 20:28.

Occasionally one does become involved in a vacancy where changes are called for. Here the vacancy pastor must make a decision whether he should institute these changes or whether such changes should be left for the permanent pastor. It is obvious, where sinful or heretical practices are found the vacancy pastor must take a stand and introduce changes that are required. If, for example, the congregation is shot through and through with lodge members, a course of instruction should be begun. If we did not do so, we would be unfaithful to our calling. On the other hand, it would seem proper not to suggest changes where the problem is merely a matter of weakness or bad judgment. One would perhaps not begin to write a new constitution or suggest a change in the way the candles are lighted. The pastor should try to be objective and not institute programs or customs that represent merely his personal likes or dislikes. Here it would be wise to remember that his call is of a limited duration. The new pastor may not enjoy working in an office with chartreuse walls or laboring with a typewriter with a 30-inch carriage.

As one begins the work of a vacancy, let us remember that there will be many that will be troubled because of the leaving of their pastor. The old, the sick, the little children are especially bothered by the fact that their beloved pastor is no longer with them. Love, kindness, and tact must be exercised lest we offend them. A vacancy pastor must also be reminded of the fact that he is not to lord it over his fellow Christians. Sometimes in our desire to be efficient and to get things done, we forget that the Christian congregation has but one Lord, and we are called to serve, not to rule, 1 Pe 5:3.

Part Three: Duties of the Vacancy Pastor

The duties of the vacancy pastor are to begin as soon as the former pastor has preached his farewell sermon. He can well begin by familiarizing himself with the congregation by reading the constitution, annual report, membership list and a number of past bulletins. As soon as possible, he will meet with the church council to do some in-depth planning. At this meeting it would be good to tactfully draw attention to the fact that the council is not assisting the pastor, rather the pastor is assisting them in carrying out the work of Christ's church. The primary concern of such a meeting is to see to it that all essential activity continues. Services are to be conducted on a regular schedule. Christian education, evangelism, administration and good stewardship are to continue. Obviously, some changes in time and dates will have to be made but extra effort should be put forth to keep as close to existing schedules as possible.

Arrangements will have to be made as to who will preach. If possible, the vacancy pastor should conduct all services. In so doing he can further the goals he has determined to follow; also, he will develop an acquaintanceship with the members so that they will not hesitate to call on him in time of need. If the vacancy

pastor must miss being present at other services, he surely should be present on Sundays on which Holy Communion is celebrated.

At times conditions may necessitate the need for preaching assistance. On occasion, it may even be necessary to ask a competent layman to conduct a worship service. If this need should arise, one would want to instruct the congregation and provide the lay-reader with sufficient information and fitting material for the service.

At the planning meeting a delegation of responsibility should be sought. Questions should be answered. Who will look after the correspondence? Who will be in charge of property upkeep? Who will be in charge of stewardship? Elders may be asked to develop a list of those who need to be called on. They may also be assigned the task of making many of the calls where their gifts can be put to use. It wouldn't hurt for the elders to conduct an every member visitation during the vacancy to assure and encourage the membership. Naturally, the vacancy pastor will spend some time with the elders equipping them for their ministry in the congregation.

A central office and phone number should be maintained. All calls and questions should be directed to the congregation's president or channeled through the church secretary so that members know where to call for information or to reach the pastor.

Records and membership lists should be examined by the elders and the vacancy pastor to see that they are up to date. It is also the duty of the vacancy pastor to see that they are kept up to date. At the close of the vacancy it would be good to again review all records with the elders so that all is in order for the new pastor. It has happened that members have been lost simply through carelessness in record keeping.

By this time it is evident that the vacancy pastor must work closely with the leadership in the congregation. He must have communication and a good working relationship with the council, elders, principal of the school, teachers and society and committee heads. He does not have the leisure to get acquainted over the course of several months; he should seek out these people early and discuss their programs with them.

The vacancy pastor is called upon in his diploma of vocation to "attend all meetings of the congregation and its societies." The necessity of his attending all meetings of the congregation can be taken for granted, however, some might question his need to be present at meetings of the youth group or women's guild. These groups are not separate from the congregation and as the pastor is the public minister of the congregation he should also be present to give guidance to the organizations of the congregation. Furthermore, meetings of societies give the pastor an opportunity for contact with individuals, something very necessary during a vacancy.

Christian education of the young dare not be neglected during a vacancy. This concern is only to be second to the conducting of public worship services. Regular instruction classes, Sunday school and the like must be continued. A few months is a long time in the life of a child. Satan attacks the most vulnerable. A youngster whose instruction is neglected for several months may just be lost for the Kingdom.

As one serves a vacant congregation he should condition himself to feel the yearnings and needs of the people he serves. This empathy will lead him to address himself to the needs of the people. He will also be led to offer up specific prayers in the name of the congregation. When a call is sent out or returned, prayers should be offered. The faithful pastor will also remember those whom he serves in his private prayers.

Although it has already been mentioned, the vacancy pastor should see to it that calling on members is done during the vacancy. Elders can assist in this area. However, where there is a shut-in desiring communion, a seriously ill person, a troubled member or a delinquent, there is no substitute for a personal visit from the pastor.

A vacancy pastor, as a regular, must be extremely careful that he does not criticize the work of the previous pastor. He has no call for such judging. Neither should the vacancy pastor listen to gossip concerning the former pastor.

As he does the work of a vacancy pastor, one should keep in close contact with the Circuit Pastor, District President, and, if it is involved, the mission board. Their knowledge of the congregation and its needs

will surely be valuable in giving pastoral care to its members. Communication with these advisors of the congregation might also help them to better serve in their capacities as servants in the church.

In consultation with the District President and the congregation dates for call meetings (or, hopefully, meeting) will be established. It is necessary that such meetings are well publicized and that there be a good attendance. The conducting of a call meeting is left to the District President or his representative. A vacancy pastor will not in any way try to influence the calling process. Old roommates or buddies from the old football squad might be good friends but may not be God's choice to serve the need of a neighboring congregation.

Often the responsibility of writing the letter which is to accompany the call to the pastor-elect falls on the vacancy pastor. Such letters should be written in consultation with the council of the calling congregation.

An accompanying letter must give an accurate, comprehensive description of the congregation. Surely included in such a letter will be a fair assessment of the challenges to be encountered in the new field. One might also include a paragraph on the congregation's attitude toward its own role in the ministry of Christ. The letter will include a description of the physical facilities and the community. All of this information must be presented, not with the purpose of luring a man to the field but rather to help him answer the question, "Where can I, in view of the various circumstances of my life best serve my Savior?" Caution must be exercised in writing this letter. Sad to say, more than one pastor has observed that the goals and predictions expressed in the accompanying letter were mere "campaign promises" or the visions of the letter writer rather than the true picture of the circumstances. Copies of all correspondence should be sent to the Circuit Pastor and District President.

After the call has been accepted you may fill in the new pastor on the number of golf courses, closeness of lakes and the lovely garden plot in the back yard of the parsonage.

There is a question as to whether a letter should be addressed to the congregation of the pastor who is called. If the decision is to do so, such a letter must be tactfully written and should say no more than to express a common concern for the kingdom of God and a desire that the sister congregation join in praying that the pastor reach a God-pleasing decision. All correspondence between the called pastor and the congregation should be handled expeditiously. The effected people are vitally concerned in these matters. These are matters that deal with the welfare of souls and therefore require haste. If a call has been declined or accepted, this information should at once be related to the congregation and the District President.

Part Four: The End of the Vacancy

The constitution of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod assigns to the District President the responsibility of authorizing all ordinations and installations. The time for ordination and installation and the choice of officiants is generally arrived at through consultation with the congregation, the District President and the called pastor. The vacancy pastor should take the leadership in making preparations for the worship service for the installation of the new pastor. The circuit pastor or the vacancy pastor may conduct the rite of installation. The preacher can be selected in consultation with the congregation and the pastor-elect. Area pastors are usually invited by the congregation to participate in the custom of laying on of hands. For the sake of uniformity, it would seem wise to follow the order of installation found in the Lutheran Agenda.

The vacancy pastor owes a debt of love to his brother in the ministry as well as to the congregation he serves. For that reason, he should do everything to see to it that the arrival of the new pastor is a pleasant one. First impressions are important. It is discouraging for a new pastor and his family, after traveling many weary miles, to arrive at a dirty, unpainted parsonage or to have to tread through a sea of weeds to the church. Gentle admonitions to the congregation in such areas are in place. A quiet, friendly, welcoming group, representing the leadership of the congregation, creates a good feeling between the new pastor and his congregation.

The congregation should also be counseled to provide sufficient time between the day of the pastor's arrival and the day he begins his labors so that he can get his personal affairs in order. If he must divide his time

between settling his family and his church work, both family and his ministry will suffer during those early days.

Congregations are usually thankful for the services of a vacancy pastor. They realize the extra hours he has put in and are appreciative of the fact that he helped them in their time of need. Should, however, there be any expressions of gratitude, these should be made before the new pastor arrives. The last service the vacancy pastor can do is to remove himself from the picture. By his grace, God has again provided his people with a full-time pastor. Hopefully, the vacancy will have served the spiritual growth of the congregation and the vacancy pastor.

Below you will find a Call form for a vacancy pastor that is used in the Nebraska District:

In Nomine Jesu

REQUEST FOR SERVICES DURING A VACANCY

We, the members of _____ Evangelical
Lutheran Church at _____,
in a lawful meeting assembled on _____ having released
our pastor, herewith extend to you,

the Call to serve as Interim Pastor.

We expect you to arrange for services or to conduct them yourself every Sunday and on special festivals, to attend all meetings of the congregation and its societies, to instruct our catechumens in the Word of God as taught in the Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther, to visit the sick and erring, and to function in whatever other manner your services as shepherd of our souls may be required.

Our Obligation

For your ministrations among us we agree to pay you _____ per
month during the interim, or until the successor is installed. If the press of your duties at any time requires you to seek additional pastoral assistance, we authorize you to acquire the same and ask that you remunerate him from the payment agreed above.

Signed in the name of _____ Ev. Lutheran Church:

_____ President

_____ Secretary