

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE GOSPEL MINISTRY

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INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE GOSPEL MINISTRY

Arianism, gnosticism, synergism, Pelagianism, Calvinism, Arminianism, legalism, materialism, hedonism, humanism, ecumenism, unionism and a host of other unscriptural "isms" have pestered and plagued the New Testament church and its ministry since almost its very beginning. This underscores to the point of an axiom that whenever and wherever the Lord of the church grants the riches of his grace, then and there Satan works double time and with doubled effort to undo and undermine the Lord's activity. You will experience this in your ministries as have faithful, Christian pastors before you.

Still I welcome you without hesitation and without reservation to the most blessed experience ever granted to sinful human beings, that of serving in the public ministry of the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, that "good work," as the King James translation puts it, that "noble task," as the New International Version states it, that "koestlich Werk," as Dr. Martin Luther rendered it, and that "kalon ergon," as the Holy Spirit originally inspired it. That God would entrust us unworthy sinners with the holy work of proclaiming the good news of deliverance from the ruinous consequences of sin through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, that he would be pleased to station us in pulpits where we can deliver the "power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes," that he should use our preaching and teaching to lead others into the joy of salvation and that he should privilege us with opportunities to bring his comfort and strength to despairing sinners for their eternal blessing, what a godsend! What a high and holy honor!

As though that were not enough, God still provides more. When in response to a Christ-centered sermon with apt, timely and helpful applications to the Christian life, the pastor receives the spontaneous, heartfelt word of a hearer, "Pastor, you preached what I needed to hear and I thank you for it," when following a bedside devotion at the hospital with a member suffering a terminal illness the pastor hears, "That devotion helped me more than all the medicine in the world," when at the conclusion of a counseling session with a member troubled and distressed over personal weaknesses and failings, the pastor is told, "Your guidance from God's Word has helped more than you can know," and when after a funeral service, a mourner, grateful for the Christian comfort expressed in the service, approaches the pastor to say, "You put such a rich meaning into the Christian's death that you actually made me look forward to the time of my death," the faithful, Christian pastor knows he has double reason to thank God for that "good work," that "noble task," that gospel ministry, that blessed service into which the God of all grace has called him.

That in brief is what the gospel ministry is all about. It's people in touch with people, an interpersonal relationship. It's people helping people with the most effective tool found on this earth, the gospel. In the interpersonal relationships of the gospel ministry, it will not be just you helping others, but also they helping you. If ever you find yourself feeling low, afflicted with the blah's, I can think of no better cure than to get up from the chair of self-pity to go out and call on people; talk with them one-on-one as a pastor, a shepherd of souls. I guarantee you a quick recovery from what ails you. How gracious that our God would grant that as a by-product of gospel-rooted interpersonal relationships with fellow-redeemed!

A. In The Congregation

Because it is gospel-rooted, therefore the interpersonal relationship that will truly edify must be learned and constantly nurtured. None of us is born with the ability to carry on effective and blessed interpersonal relationships. We may be

born with what is called, "the gift of gab," easily carrying on a conversation with others, but that does not effect good interpersonal relationships in and of itself. In fact, it may prove the very opposite since our sinful nature would use that "gift" for self-serving ends. On the other hand, even the person who has a rather quiet personality by nature can still effect sound, gospel-rooted interpersonal relationships when "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." It is the Lord with his grace who must open our lips and then the mouth will show forth his praise. That mouth will speak of the "son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." If those with whom we come into contact see us radiating the warmth of the gospel in our personality and conduct, they will know that we have provided them with a visible illustration of the gospel as the "power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes," the "good news of great joy...for all the people."

The weekly divine services you conduct afford the greatest number of opportunities for interpersonal relationships in the least amount of time. I prefer to call them divine services rather than worship services, because the primary emphasis of these services lies not on the individual's worship of God, but it lies on God's serving us with the gospel in Word and sacrament; that makes it a divine service. Because I want each person who attends to know before the service begins that I have good news to bring that day, I make it a point to greet the people by name before the service begins with as sincere and genuine a "good morning" ~~that~~ ^{as} I can give. I want them to know how happy I am for the opportunity to feed them from the means of grace to strengthen their faith, nourish their souls and enrich their lives with the blessings Christ has won for them. That, of course, means that I have to be the first one at church. It means setting out my clothes the night before so that when 5:15 a.m. rolls around Sunday morning I do not pull out of the closet a kelly green shirt to wear with purple checkered trousers and an orange blazer. It means declining invitations to some "schwein" the night before, lest I greet people on Sunday morning with the odor of pickled herrings and garlic bread eaten the night before coming out my mouth ~~and~~ send them gagging and reeling to the floor. It also means spending time Saturday night scrubbing the hands, particularly before communion Sunday, in order to ream out the grime accumulated under the finger nails while changing the car's engine oil and while pulling weeds out of the garden the week before. I also trust that by the time you will have started on your journey to your field of gospel labor, you will have consigned to the gehenna your faded, threadbare, holey, cut-off jeans, your spaghetti-strap, fish-netted, and fishy-smelling shirts, especially if they advertise a brand of Milwaukee's finest brew or the latest rock record, together with the visored caps which emblazon the names of choice-cut chewing tobacco or snuff. I don't know of a single congregation in Synod which looks forward to seeing its new pastor arrive, ^{in the process} ~~attired~~ in such sackcloth and ashes. On the other hand, I don't expect your congregation wants you to arrive dressed in black from head to toe. Use good judgment in the matter of dress. Keep your shoes polished, your ties free from gravy stains, your trousers and suit coats cleaned and pressed. Your congregation does not expect you to set the fashion trends for your community but if ~~it~~ ^{they} does expect you will show respect for the office you hold by the clothing you wear.

Make another area of your concern your liturgical dress while conducting a service. Don't forget to send your pulpit robe to the cleaners for eliminating built-up layers of sweaty "b.o.'s." Should you wear a clerical collar or not? Surplice or not? Don't introduce them if they were not worn by your predecessor. Wait until you have the feel of the spirit and attitude of the congregation. What if he did but you don't care to or don't have the resources to purchase such costly items? Discuss the matter with the vacancy pastor or with the circuit pastor or with the chairman of the congregation for their counsel and advice. Do not let your dress detract in any way from maintaining good interpersonal relationships. Make it your

policy to accomodate yourself as far as practical to the prevailing practice of the pastors in your area.

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First impressions from the first words you say and the first appearance you give when you arrive on the scene will stick with your people. They will stick because the people are interested in you. Do not think that this puts you on a tight-rope for your ministry. Instead, it should bolster your confidence as you take up your calling. Remember, these people who are about to receive you are all for you. Not one of them wants to see you fail. Not one of them has in mind to take your position away from you. What a special honor belongs to you as a servant of the gospel. In other professions many a colleague and associate would just as soon see you falter in order to ^{take their place} take your place. But in your case the congregation is praying for you that God will bless your work. Appropriate appreciation of this is in order from day one of your ministry. Don't let that blessing disintegrate by trying to be as different as possible from the start. That will ^{cause} everyone to wonder about this new preacher they are receiving. Sensitive souls are involved in your work.

When you arrive at your destination, you will begin making a tremendous adjustment and transition from a life centered around books to a Christ-centered evangelizing life around God's people. After going through our WELS educational system, you certainly have learned how to study. But studying, necessary as it is in the ministry, is no longer your full-time calling. You have been called to share what you have learned and what you will continue to learn from your study of the gospel. You have been called to share the joy of the gospel with others in whatever situation you find yourself. God will present the opportunities daily. But you cannot simply sit in your study and wait for the opportunities to come. You must adjust your life for getting out among people. Learning to recognize where people are coming from in their lives as you visit and talk with them is a must for wholesome interpersonal relationships.

When taking up your pastorate and settling into your parsonage, remember that this has become your home, not a temporary stopping-off place until you get something you feel is better suited to your tastes and talents. Determine at the very outset that where you are going is the best spot in the world for you since God has sent you there. As the saying puts it, "Home is where the heart is." If your heart is in the ministry, then your home is where you are exercising that ministry, not back where you grew up. The sooner pastor and wife call their place home, the happier they will be and the congregation along with them. People are sensitive to what opinions you form about their city, congregation, church building and parsonage. While Peter had the wrong reason for saying as he did on the transfiguration mount, "Lord, it is good for us to be here," you have every right reason for saying it as you begin your pastorate.

Since your people will be happy to receive you as their next pastor, you then should be happy to receive them as your parishoners, people whose lives you can and you want to touch with the life-supporting message of the gospel. Do not set yourself up on a pedestal to have people climb up to your level; do not look down at them as though they should feel honored to have such a person as you in their midst. More than one pastor has ruined his ministry by a better-than-thou attitude toward his congregation. You can easily fall into that tragic trap when you note the weaknesses and deficiencies in the sanctified life of the membership, be it poor contributions, poor involvement in volunteer labor and service, poor participation in congregational singing, etc. You will not overcome these weaknesses by letting them have it from the pulpit, nailing them against the wall. Christ wants you to receive them as sheep, not goats, neither giraffes nor pigs. Sheep need leading; if you do not show them the way, if you do not contribute a generous portion of your income, nor

help when the church grounds are being spruced up, nor sing along with the congregation in the church service, nor show them that you are working with them, then do not complain about the poor stewardship life of those under your care. Thank them when they are doing their best and encourage them to produce even more abundant fruits in the future. If it seems that you are seeing no progress, do not give up in frustration; neither vent your frustrations out on them with scathing rebukes. Talk the matter over in a gentle, concerned manner with a trusted member of the congregation, with a neighboring and/or circuit pastor. Seek out advice and counsel. Conscientiously and gratefully make the most and the best of your people. Pastors who appreciate their people are the pastors who do the most enduring work. Pastors filled with the Spirit's gifts and graces show themselves appreciative, approachable and of a tender heart.

Take a personal interest in each of your people. Learn their names quickly. Regard each of them as a unique child of God. Do this from a pastoral perspective to avoid becoming so gushy that it becomes an obnoxious put-on. Closeness, not aloofness, should mark your ministries. At the same time exercise care lest closeness degenerate into a dangerous situation. Closeness does not mean that ^{you} must be on a first-name basis with everyone and they with you. Let them love you as their pastor, not as their buddy. Be careful that you do not make one of your parishoners your confidant, one whom you have chosen for hearing the innermost thoughts of your heart and soul. He may turn out a person who in a moment of weakness will blurt out to others what he has heard you say. This can prove most damaging to your ministry. He may also become a person who in time stands in need of church discipline. Then it can become a most difficult task for you to administer it to him.

The times God gives you to work with the souls under your care are special moments of highest importance. Use the time wisely and well, since so often these people are with you today and are gone tomorrow. They come and go. Will it be the case that because of your ministry they have been drawn closer to Christ or not? Their love/^{of} the Word has been deepened or not? Their faith has been strengthened or not? Make the most of the moments God gives you with them. If you will be serving an area that has a highly mobile population, you will experience an empty feeling when some solid members leave the congregation because of a job transfer. Do not let this put a cloud of disappointment and frustration over your ministry. Other members will soon pick up your attitude and, if your congregation's size is small, will feel that the future of the congregation is hopeless. Rather, appreciate these people for the efforts they have made even though their stay has been short. Don't let disappointment ruin your relationship with the rest of the flock and destroy or delay the progress of the congregation. Give thanks to God that their membership with you has proven itself a real blessing and pray that they continue to be a blessing to another congregation.

Live up to the capabilities God has given you. He has not called you to end up a failure; he has called you to excellence. To be sure, not all have the same capabilities, but all have the same Lord who in his wisdom and grace has called each of you to your particular field of labor where you can use your capabilities to the fullest to his honor and to the furtherance of his kingdom. Give your members every reason to expect that you will give them your all in happy, joyful service, even if circumstances at the time do not promote such a happy joy. Time and again you will find it the case that you are confronted with a situation with which you have to deal even though it is not on your list of favorite things to do. But when you deal with it with the prayer that the Lord will bless your work with his wisdom and counsel, just so frequently will you not only find that your task is not as unpleasant as you thought it might be, but that in the process God has equipped you with what it takes to have it issue in a God-pleasing outcome so that you end up feeling good

about it all.

Establish and preserve with all your might a good relationship with your church council, heads of committees, teachers in the day and/or Sunday school, youth, men and women organizations. Let them know you are willing to work with them and for them. Consult with them about their plans and programs. You may have some ideas and plans. But by all means, do not force your ideas and plans on them. Talk it over with one or two to learn their responses to what you are suggesting. Make it a consulting process, not a dictating process. Don't take anyone by surprise with what you are planning; you can count on it that ^{you} will experience opposition of the fiercest kind if you try to spring something on the congregation, like announcing in a Sunday bulletin that you are starting a fund drive to purchase a new organ. You won't like it when at a voters' meeting someone springs something on you without much forethought and planning. Common courtesy calls on you to be just as thoughtful toward the congregation as you want them to be toward you. Many problems arise when a pastor fails to consult regularly with those in leadership positions before taking some action.

Do not look upon organizations in your congregation as ends in themselves; see them as means to an end. Youth, men, ladies organizations need your guidance so that they may more deeply appreciate their roles as fellow-servants in the kingdom. That means instruction from the Word, inspiration and encouragement which you are called to provide. There is much to offer these groups in the way of Bible studies, topics and discussions. These organizations do much for you and the congregation. Work with them. Show your personal appreciation. Let them know that what they do in response to the gospel is service to the Lord.

Get to know your members. Visit them. Don't forget to thank them for the high honor and privilege of visiting them in their homes. But choose the time for visiting carefully. Dropping in on them at 7 a.m. or 11 p.m. does not promote good interpersonal relationships. Use the phone first. Don't just pop in on people. Be very careful about visiting wives of members at times when the husband is not at home; I said, "visiting," not, dropping off an item which you can hand them at the door. Do not become too personally involved with the wives of others, for big troubles will follow bringing scandal to you, the congregation, the Synod and the cause of the kingdom. Should that develop, you may regret it later, repent and be forgiven, but the damage will have been done. No longer will people have the confidence to call you their pastor, resulting in a resignation from the ministry. Interpersonal relationships with all members? Yes! But relationships which dare not be followed by improper emotional and physical involvement.

The future of the church lies with children and young people. Do not neglect them; talk with them, not at them. Learn to listen to what they have to say instead of just dictating to them. Love them in spite of their immature ways, their awkwardness, their idiosyncrasies. They need the love, the understanding and the guidance which the gospel also grants them. With concern and effort on your part you will be able to exert a positive influence on them. What a joy when a youngster decides on becoming a pastor or teacher because of your influence and inspiration. God's Word advises pastors, "Treat the young men as brothers and the younger women as sisters, with all purity." Pray for them as you do for all people.

Be fastidious, even to a fault, about keeping accurate church records. Record all official acts such as member acquisitions and removals, baptisms, confirmations,

communion attendances, marriages and burials. Give out baptismal, confirmation and marriage certificates at the time these acts are performed, not weeks or months later. That means, make sure you have a supply of these certificates on hand at all times. I give a statistical report at each quarterly meeting of the congregation listing the number of baptized souls, communicant members, family units and voting members with the number of persons gained and/or lost during the quarter. I encourage you to keep an up-to-date account of these statistics so that at any time you can state to anyone a current, accurate figure. This makes it much easier for compiling quarterly and annual reports and for submitting the report to the Synod's statistician each year. Our district has the policy that if a pastor leaves a congregation for another without having records complete and up-to-date, the offender can expect to be shot at dawn and hastily buried without benefit of clergy.

Permit me to share with you comments about pastors that endanger good interpersonal relationships. I list them without any rank of importance: forgetful, talks too much instead of listening more; fails to understand people; poor social graces; argumentative; too quiet; too dull and dry as he speaks; lacks humility; thinks he knows it all; impatient with the lesser gifted; family demands too much of his time away from his work; no discipline in instruction classes; lacks initiative; too casual in his dress and speech; more taken up with outside interests, such as hobbies, hunting, computers, than with his work; takes himself too seriously; no sense of humor; poor manager of time and of his personal finances; disorganized; not living up to capabilities; insists his is the only way for getting a job done; legalistic; cannot make decisions. All of these make for poor interpersonal relationships. Where proper relationships thrive, there adverse comments about a person's ministry become conspicuous by their absence. How important to cultivate meaningful interpersonal relationships with sanctified Christian wisdom gained from a diligent application of the truths of Scripture to ourselves. Before preaching to others, let the Scripture text first preach to you; then will you find the right words to say, speaking to your hearers in a very helpful way with the result that interpersonal relationships will prosper and thrive in your congregation.

B. With Wife and Family

Of inestimable value in such cultivation is a faithful, helpful wife. As a pastor's wife, you have your God-given roles as the pastor's helper, confidant, comforter, lover, companion and best friend in a ministry that demands much of a person's time and energies. You will be the one who knows what is happening in the congregation. You will also be the first one who can sense when your husband's interpersonal relationships in the congregation could stand improving. Because you know this you will have to realize that so much of what you know you must keep to yourself. At times this can prove a most difficult task. How dearly you would love to have someone outside your family whom you can take into your confidence; how deeply you may feel the need to talk yourself out with someone you can trust. Will you find such a person? I dare say that in 99 congregations out of 100, you will not. Do not let this distress you. Consider the positive side. First of all, you can have that wonderful peace of mind knowing that you are not being tempted to betray confidences, particularly your husband's; no one can make the charge that you talk too much. But more importantly, because your heavenly Father for Jesus' sake reads your every thought and hears your every word, you can pour out everything to him in the surest confidence that he knows, he understands. Other persons can so easily misunderstand and misinterpret what you are saying.

The pastor who loves you will at times keep something from you, not because he doesn't trust you but because he wants to spare you ^{while it} should others try to pry information from you. With a clear conscience you can reply you just don't know because no

one has said anything to you about the matter. This also helps your husband's interpersonal relationships with the members because they can have the assurance that he does not tell everything he knows about people so that they can take him into their confidence. Sometimes it may be wise for you to remind your husband not to tell you something, not because you don't care about his ministry, but because you want good interpersonal relationships preserved and promoted.

Pastors, you need remember that the congregation has not called your wife, but only you to serve in its midst. Sometimes members may forget this and expect too much of your wife. Neither should you volunteer her service. Let her do so herself, of her own accord and love of the Savior. She should not be expected to join you in every phase of your work.

On the other hand, you wives will not help interpersonal relationships should you withdraw yourselves from any involvement in congregational activity except attendance at church services and Bible classes. While I do not consider it wise for the pastor's wife to serve as president of the congregation's women's organizations, I see no reason why you should not serve in other capacities. Neither should you hesitate to sing in the choir, serve as teacher for Sunday school or vacation Bible school, and help clean the church when volunteers are requested to give the church interior a thorough cleaning.

Pastors, do not take your wife for granted publicly or privately. Set aside times that are strictly for her, on which she can count and which will help cement your marriage relationship. Let yourselves be seen in public enjoying such activities as bicycling, picnicing, concert-going, gardening as well as other wholesome activities. I do caution and advise against going to the local bistro for disco-dancing or to Whoopee John's for polka dancing to the tune of "In Heaven There Ain't No Beer." At wedding receptions make it a practice to leave before the band starts performing for dancing. At all functions you will be complimenting your wife publicly by staying with her, not deserting her in order to visit with others. Let people know that you love your wife the way Christ loved his bride, the church, that you enjoy being with her. If you are cold toward her in public and ignore her, you can become a marked target for other women who can start all kinds of gossip and rumors, or worse yet, devote their attentions to you.

Your children also play a vital role in maintaining good interpersonal relationships. Something has gone wrong should a pastor neglect his children and drastically wrong if your children regard you more as a dictator and tyrant than a pastor and father. God asks you to rule your children well; he does not tell you to rule with a steel fist. Ruling well means ruling with love, sometimes tough love, but still love. Use experiences with your children to teach you further insight into good interpersonal relationships with others. A good relationship with your children enhances a good relationship with your congregation.

C. In The Community

But your sphere of interpersonal relationships extends much farther. It also extends into the community where you live. God's Word urges you to have a good reputation with outsiders so that the ministry will not be discredited. To your neighbors who more than likely will not be members of your congregation, to your barber, your dentist, your banker, your child's Little League coach and to anyone else who makes your acquaintance, you are always Pastor So-and-So. Not for a moment can you divest yourself of your office. The way you act toward them will tell them much about the type of ministry you conduct. Do you think you could win any of them for Christ if you fail to be friendly to them, or if you become abusive and abrasive with them, or

if you take unethical advantage of them as business men, or if you try to show yourself a good-time Charlie with them at a local pub?

Undoubtedly you will meet clergymen of other denominations in your community. You may get to know each other quite well. Even though you are not in agreement with them doctrinally, at least be polite with them. Generally you will find that even though you cannot join them in religious fellowship, yet if you explain to them your reasons in a kind and loving way, they will give you their respect.

If you are asked to serve on some community service board other than the United Fund, first clear it with your council and explain exactly what the service entails. If your participation is questioned, it would be wise to consider declining. If you decline, thank those who invited you and assure them you will be happy to serve in other ways as time and circumstances permit. If no one on the council objects and you accept the invitation, be prepared to answer when someone asks you to open the meeting with prayer. Reply thanking them for the courtesy but that you consider it wiser to have a moment of silence in which each can pray his own way.

Make yourself known to the local hospital and other health care agencies. Acquaint yourself with their policies for visiting hours, clergy parking, etc. By the way, be careful about publishing in the bulletin those who are hospitalized; some members may not appreciate notice of their hospitalization. Current laws may make you liable for a suit if you divulge this information without prior consent, regarding it an invasion of privacy. Remind your members to inform you when they are hospitalized so that you may visit them with the comfort of God's Word.

D. In The Synodical Family

Lastly, but by no means least, promote and treasure interpersonal relationships in the synodical family, with fellow-pastors in the circuit, the conference, the district and with those in synodical administration. These are your brothers in Christ who carry the same kind of a zeal for the gospel kingdom-work as you do. They are not out to find fault and undermine your ministry. They are not bent on self-seeking ambition which they want to satisfy at your expense. They treasure and value the unity with which God has blessed us. They make every effort to preserve and promote it. They count it a privilege to have you with them in the ministry; they welcome the opportunity to work with you in kingdom service. They await your help and cooperation. When people work together, much is accomplished. If you have questions about a certain course of procedure, ask; they will be happy to answer. If you have concerns about some facet of kingdom work, address them in a kind and loving way. Again, those whom you address will be happy to respond.

Leaving the confines of the Seminary, you will have a new set of colleagues with which to exercise interpersonal relationships, brothers in your conference and district. As you get to know them, you may feel inferior to some and superior to others. Keep those opinions to yourself and regard each of them as fellow-workers whom God has chosen to join you in kingdom work. Religiously attend circuit, conference and district meetings. One of the first warning signs that a person's ministry is heading for trouble is when a brother habitually absents himself from these meetings. These meetings are designed to help you in your work. Listen to what is being said and learn from what you hear. Just as it will take you a while to get the feel of your ministry, so it will also take you a while to grasp the significance of the orderly procedure followed in going about kingdom work on a world-wide scale. As you gain in wisdom and understanding, you will appreciate more and more the marvelous grace of God which has blessed our church body so richly these 134 years.

In order that these blessings continue, we depend on you, your prayers, your support, your cooperation. Do all you can to promote good interpersonal relationships within the fellowship of faith.

Permit me to close with the words of Hebrews 13: "May the God of peace who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."