

The Circuit Pastor As Advisor to Congregations

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In our Christian Day School newsletter a section appears entitled, "Daffy Definitions." The columnist attempts to find words with which the children in the various grades are totally unfamiliar and which may be humorously misleading. For example, the word may be "matador" and some second grader may innocently say that a matador is a person who places mats in front of doors. Experience has taught me that you might well get a similar reaction were you to ask many, if not most, of the laymen in our congregations who and what a Circuit Pastor is. You may receive any answer from "a pastor who knows something about electric circuits" to "Synod's fund raisers" to "I have no idea at all." Now, if part of the Circuit Pastor's responsibility is to be an advisor or counselor to the congregations in his circuit, obviously this situation needs to change. In the following remarks an attempt will be made to indicate the Circuit Pastor's duties should include that of being an advisor to the congregations of his circuit as well as ways and means of carrying out this responsibility.

Though there is no direct word of Scripture that commands that an office similar to that of Circuit Pastor as advisor to congregations be employed in the church, I believe there is Scriptural and historical precedence and encouragement for such an office. Immediately comes to mind the work of the Apostle Paul. Frequently in the book of the Acts of the Apostles we read of Paul revisiting congregations where he had formerly preached the Gospel, but which were now being served by other leaders. In Acts 14 we are told that Paul and Barnabas revisited congregations in Lystra, Iconium and Derbe. In his various Epistles we also read of Paul as advisor or counselor to congregations where he had once served or had never served as pastor. In some cases his advice and help were requested as in I Corinthians. At times there were special problems that needed to be addressed as at Corinth and in the churches in Galatia. At other times there was no special request nor was any special need apparent, as in his letters to the Ephesians and Philippians. His contact, encouragement and support seems generally to have been well received, and he was not conceived as an outsider interfering with or undermining the work being done in those churches. Then, also, there is the call for unity of the spirit in the bond of love and of peace in Scripture. This is not called for only among the pastors in the church but among the people in the pew also. Can an office such as the Circuit Pastor help establish such unity? I believe it can.

Historically, we are all aware of the visitation of the clergy and congregations in Saxony in Luther's day. You can read of it in Volume 40 of Luther's Works under the heading, "Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors." This work was written by Melancthon and endorsed by Luther. It clearly includes the desire to have men appointed to visit the congregations in Saxony. True, the situation at that time was described as deplorable. So the need was greater than in the church today, some will contend. However, might wisdom dictate evangelical visitation from those appointed before a certain situation becomes deplorable?

Finally, reading the introduction in our *Handbook for Circuit Pastors* will tell you that our own Synod realized a need for some kind of visitation of our congregations from its very inception.

If there is general agreement on this that Scripture does not forbid, but rather encourages evangelical contact with congregations, and if there is general agreement also that the history of the Lutheran Church has realized such a need while guarding very carefully against any unscriptural, man-made hierarchy, we will proceed to a discussion of why the Circuit Pastor should serve as advisor or counselor today to our WELS congregations.

By the grace of God conditions are hardly deplorable in our church. Yet, Satan will see to it that problems always exist. There seems to be a growing amount of unrest and dissatisfaction between congregations and their pastors. There appear to be more resignations from the ministry. Young men appear to get off on the wrong foot a bit more frequently. More pastors, also in our circles, seem to be falling into sins of a public nature which need to be dealt with in the congregation. If only one of these situations could be averted

or stopped in its tracks because the congregation has had some kind of contact with the Circuit Pastor, what a blessing it would be for that pastor, congregation and the spread of the Gospel.

But who will the congregation go to for help or advice if they do not know there is such an office as Circuit Pastor, who he is and what he is to do? Will the pastor go to him? At times, yes. But if the problem is the pastor, or the pastor is embarrassed or feels he can handle it himself, what will the result be? In a survey I conducted among some forty congregations, of the responses that were returned from Councilmen and other lay leaders, only two knew who the Circuit Pastor was, and virtually no one knew what his office entailed.

From this survey as well as private discussions with pastors and laymen the following was learned. Nearly all the pastors agreed that the Circuit Pastor should become more known to the congregations and should have some kind of regular contact with them. The brethren in almost all cases expressed what former President Naumann wrote in the *“Forward to the Handbook for Circuit Pastors”*: “At times both a member of a congregation and his pastor desire the mutual counsel of an experienced brother.” If pastors will acknowledge their sinfulness and weakness, they will also realize that there will be times a member or members of their congregations might want to speak to someone about him or his work; yes, even, as someone said to me recently, about how their pastor is working too hard and they are worried about him. If there has been some regular contact from the Circuit Pastor and knowledge of who he is and what his office is, the way will be opened to good, evangelical counsel that observes the Eighth Commandment and abides by Christian love, not undermining the brother’s ministry but undergirding it.

Again, in the aforementioned survey and discussions it became apparent that most laymen also desired more contact with the Circuit Pastor. In no case was circumventing their own pastor even hinted at. Rather a desire for help, unity and uniformity of practice were given as the reasons for this desire.

It was interesting to note that general agreement was voiced among pastors and laymen regarding specific areas where the Circuit Pastor might be of help. Those areas were stewardship (both local and synodical), salary setting, congregation-pastor problems and needs, uniformity of practice and sharing ideas

It would be unfair not to mention the concern of some of the brethren and a few laymen (always from the same congregation) concerning possible interference or dictation from above (Synod, not heaven), if the office of Circuit Pastor were to increase in its scope as advisor to congregations. They preferred to leave it as stated in the handbook in quoting the District Constitution, Article XXI, Section 2, that the Circuit Pastor should “visit congregations when invited or delegated by the President.” I think we can all appreciate the concern and should be aware of it. None of us would ever want to, nor should we force ourselves on any congregation in our circuit. Yet as Luther said concerning the visitation of his day, “We hope that they (the pastors) will not ungratefully and proudly despise our love and good intention, but will willingly, without any compulsion, subject themselves in a spirit of love to such visitation.”

One brother mentioned the concern that regular contact of some kind with each congregation would give the impression that the Circuit Pastor was called by many congregations and not just his own. That brings up a very important question. Is the election by fellow pastors, teachers and laymen a call from them to serve them as Circuit Pastor? The visitors of Luther’s day were called. If it is not a call, what is it? If it is, which I maintain it is, then what is the scope of the call? Perhaps that needs clearer definition in the handbook and merits review with the voting representatives of each congregation before each Circuit Pastor election. If the duties of Circuit Pastor include being advisor to congregations, more should be said, I believe, in the handbook as to what those duties are and some suggestions given as to how they might best be carried out. As Luther said, “lack of sufficiently explicit directives hampered the visits.” Then those directives should be made available in some manner to our pastors and congregations. It remains for each Circuit Pastor to make his office known to the congregations in his circuit.

“How might this be done?” I asked in the survey and discussions alluded to a number of times already. The suggestions, to my surprise, were many. They might be grouped into three categories: I. To the individual congregation; II. At group meetings; and III. Through area, district, or Synod media.

To the individual congregations, the suggestion which surfaced nearly 100% of the time was guest preaching or swapping pulpits on some regular basis. Some suggested an informal gathering after the service to give a brief resume of how the office of Circuit Pastor is bestowed and what its scope is. Pastors should inform their people who the Circuit Pastor is and what some of his duties are immediately after he has been elected, was urged by some. Other suggestions are: serve as Mission Festival speaker, attend a church council meeting once a year, visit a service and speak to the congregation after, a written questionnaire to each Church Council each year asking in what areas, if any, they would like help. Naturally, the best situation would be if the Circuit Pastor would be invited to do these things. However, the invitation might come far more easily if it were made known that advisor to congregations is definitely part of his calling and why it is. It would also come more easily if the brethren were assured at Circuit meetings and conferences that the Circuit Pastor was there to help and advise, not interfere or lord it over. One further suggestion is this: District Presidents might urge Circuit Pastors to speak briefly of their office when conducting call meetings during vacancies. Help should be offered during the vacancy. A carefully worded statement on help available after the new pastor arrives should be made. Care should be given, of course, not to ever infer, "If you don't like the new guy, come to me." District Presidents might urge somewhat the same thing when asking the Circuit Pastor to represent them at installations and/or ordinations.

"Exposure of the Circuit Pastor and his duties to congregations could be part of the agenda of various group meetings" came forth as another suggestion. He could report regularly on synodical work at LWMS meetings, coordinating his work with the local LWMS pastoral advisor. He could be part of the agenda at each Councilmen's Conference, at times outlining his responsibilities. Perhaps circuit laypeople's seminars could be conducted once a year, and the Circuit Pastor could speak there. Circuit stewardship meetings might include some statement on the fact that the Circuit Pastor is more than a fund raiser or troubleshooter.

Finally, perhaps articles in *The Northwestern Lutheran President's Newsletter*, district Newsletters, and other media might tell who the Circuit Pastors are and what their ministry is. Somehow, however, this information needs to get into the hands of our laymen. More than once it was suggested also that a bulletin insert be made available to our congregations once a year telling who the Circuit Pastor is and what his duties are. A sample has been given you as a reference to evoke discussion.

Brethren, I'm not sure what kind of "daffy definition" for a Circuit Pastor you might get from some of the laymen or pastors of our Synod. But I have come to the conclusion that generally there is a need and a desire for more clarity on the office of Circuit Pastor as advisor to congregations in his circuit, for more effort in this same area, and for more suggestions as to how it can be done. I am in no way suggesting that some hierarchical mandates be handed down, but it appears to me that our people are looking for available help, and they need to know from whom and in what manner that help is accessible. I believe it would bring blessings on the Church and its work of spreading the Gospel as effectively as possible.

The Office of the Circuit Pastor

God's Word calls for unity of spirit and mutual encouragement in the faith and in the Lord's work.

Our Synod, therefore, has established the office of Circuit Pastor for each of the Circuits of our Synod.

Your Circuit is _____

The Circuit Pastor is elected by your pastor, teacher, and lay representatives every two years at the District Convention. His duties include being a representative of the District President in the circuit, a pastor to the pastors and their families in the circuit, and a counselor and aid to the congregations of the circuit. He invites you to call on him for any help he can be to you and to your congregation.

Your Circuit Pastor is:

Name:

Address:

Phone: