

Grow in Grace

...

To Him Be
the Glory

an Appeal to my Church

J.L. Schallert

June 16, 1988

Michigan District Convention

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library

11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

GROW IN GRACE...TO HIM BE THE GLORY

AN APPEAL TO MY CHURCH

The small town Baptist minister had set himself the task of getting the village agnostic to come to his church. The object of his appeals, however, was being difficult. He had all kinds of excuses: he didn't know anyone at the Baptist church, he would feel out of place, he wasn't a very good singer. The minister answered his objections one by one and with such success that the man was left with one last reason to stay at home Sunday morning: "I don't have a suit to wear."

"George," the pastor said, "that will pose no problem at all. If I buy you a new suit, then will you come to church on Sunday?" George agreed, and the minister bought him a nice new suit, three-piece with grey pinstripe and silver buttons. On the following Sunday he hovered at the door before the service began, waiting to greet his spiritual conquest, but there was no sign of him. All during the worship the pastor kept glancing at the back pews, to see whether George had arrived late. But his convert never came. The good clergyman fumed about this turn of events that entire afternoon and well into the evening hours. Finally he could stand it no more, and grabbing his hat, he stormed over to George's house. "Where were you this morning?" he demanded.

"Well, parson," George replied, "it was like this. I had every good intention. I got up early, took a shower and shaved, and put on my new duds. But when I looked at myself in the mirror, I decided I looked good enough to go to the Presbyterian church instead."

I wonder if it still happens much that people judge a church by the way the members dress. If it does, I wonder what they think of our Lutheran congregations. Myself, I always dress in basic black (I once heard that the pastor wears the black robe to draw attention away from himself and focus it on the Word he preaches; only in church do we actually believe that a man in a floor-length black gown can succeed in drawing attention away from himself). My garb aside, though, I wonder what visitors think of our congregations according to the way we dress for Sunday mornings.

More important, though, is the question, "What do we think of ourselves?" Perhaps the way we dress for church is a reflection of the picture in our own minds of what our congregation is all about. Do we belong to tattered, oil-stained congregation, or a blue-denim congregation, or a grey-pinstripe congregation? This clothing metaphor could get carried away with itself. But in any case, we do need to know what our congregation stands for, what we are here for, and what we can do to accomplish that goal.

"Grow in grace...to Him be the glory." That is as good a goal as any congregation can have. This essay is presented as an appeal to all our congregations to make this the reason for our existence, and the goal toward which we all strive. We will look first at how this short phrase translates into the purpose for the congregation, and then we will examine some of the ways in which this growth and glorification of God can be accomplished.

* * * * *

1. *purpose*

The constitution of any congregation begins with an article on the purpose for which the church has incorporated itself. Few of us, however, could find that document in our homes, since it takes to hiding at the bottom of forgotten desk drawers beneath piles of last year's Christmas cards. So let's start fresh. What does it mean for our congregation to grow in grace while giving

God the glory?

People have all kinds of ideas of what a congregation is for. To some it is a social club, a gathering place for parties and bingo and all kinds of activities. For others it is a form of "marryin' and buryin'" insurance, which a person joins so that he will have a place that will perform his wedding and his funeral. Still others see the congregation as a force for social change in the community and the world--fighting for the rights of the oppressed and homeless, opening soup kitchens for the hungry, setting up picket lines and lobbying for and against favorite causes.

St. Paul once told the ministers of the congregation in Ephesus that he saw his mission in life as "the task of testifying to the Gospel of God's grace." He obviously felt that this was the task of the congregations he founded as well. The purpose for our existence is to preach the Word of God, first and foremost.

I know, I know--that's what we have a pastor for. Let's nip something in the bud right now. It would be quite easy for us to say, "I support the work of my church with my offerings. I help pay the salary of the pastor and the teachers, and in this way I am doing my part to help the congregation achieve its goals." On behalf of all salaried church workers, thank you. However, if we are to be a congregation that seriously wants to accomplish something for the Lord, our members can't just throw in their money and feel they've done all that needs to be done. Active involvement on the part of every member of the congregation--that is the ideal to strive for. Offerings of money are needed, but so are offerings of time and ability.

So what I have to say is not just for pastors and not just for teachers, it is for every adult member of the congregation. Dr. C.F.W. Walther, one of the founders of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and its greatest theologian, had this to say on this subject: "Church membership makes us stockholders in

a firm that possesses and distributes vast treasures." As church members we will become personally involved in this business. It is our responsibility to see to it that the Word of God is preached from our pulpits in its fullness and truth and purity. Heaven knows, there are few enough organizations in this world that want to have anything to do with that. Most places ignore God and His Word entirely. They fill the world with their podiums and their soapboxes from which voices are raised in support of everything but God's Word--humanism, materialism, communism, atheism, and more -isms than you can shake a stick at. And there are religious bodies which distort and mangle the Gospel, some telling people to rely on themselves and their own works rather than on God and His grace, others rewriting the Law so that their members can be homosexuals or have abortions or obtain divorces for any unscriptural reason they please.

It is the duty of us all to make sure our congregation does not become like that. If you had a garden and you wanted all the plants to grow up strong and healthy, you would be careful to use the right fertilizer. In order that our congregation might grow strong in the grace of the Lord and in the ability to give Him the glory, the kind of fertilizer manufactured throughout the world will do us no good at all. Only the proper preaching of God's Word will do.

This will make our congregation unique in the world. Paul once said that a Christian is a brand new kind of creature; the same can be said for the truly Christian congregation. We have a whole new way of looking at things. Operations like those referred to above operate on the old basis; they follow the rule that if you want good things to happen, you have to make them happen. If the organization is to succeed, then each member has to work for success. If you want to remain a member, you have to pay your dues and do your part.

We operate on a totally different basis, one that seems doomed to fail. In our organization, we don't concentrate on what we do, but on what God does.

We all believe that the success of the congregation is not dependent on what we do, but on what God does through us. And we don't believe in going on and on about all the things we are going to do; the number one priority in the preaching of our congregation is what God has done for us in Christ. When an earthly organization needs things done, it assigns duties to its members; when we need things done, we recall all that God has done for us, and then do those things as a grateful response.

It is our congregation's duty to keep God's truth alive in a world that would like to leave it to die of neglect. Isn't that what it means to grow in grace to the glory of God? Grace is God's love for us undeserving sinners, the love that moved Him to save us. When our preaching concentrates on God's grace, we will grow in it and learn to put all our trust in Him. And when we do this, it is to His glory, because we are giving Him sole credit for our salvation and for the success of every earthly endeavor.

And so it is our congregation's purpose to preach God's Word in its full truth and purity, so that the message of His grace and glory may come through loud and clear. I know that we depend on the pastor to monitor his own preaching, but with all due respect to the men of the cloth, they aren't God. They are not incapable of mistakes, false notions, or fuzzy ideas. If, God forbid, the pastor should start to muddy up the message of the Gospel and to preach false things about God, the congregation had better do something more than just sit on its hands and say, "But, golly, that's not the way we learned it in Catechism class!" St. John said we should test those who claim to have God's Word to speak; we must always make sure that what is preached in our pulpit is the pure and true Word of God.

And it is our purpose to preach this Word to all who will hear it. It will help if we begin to think of the church building as an embassy of heaven, in which every guest who walks in is considered a potential defector from his

own country. I've always had the impression that, during the Cold War, our nation's embassies in communist lands were more than ready to help defectors; all that a guest had to do was mention that he had a brother in Chicago and the embassy staff killed the fatted calf to impress him with what riches he could expect if he escaped to America. Our congregation is in that business; we want people to defect from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God. And so when they come through the door, we will treat them to the best we have to show them how good they can have it in God's kingdom. We will slay the fatted calf and set out the fine wine; we don't expect to catch anyone with Seven-Up and Tostitos. We don't exist to impress people with our fine architecture or with all the programs we have for youth and ladies and old people. All these things serve their purposes, but it is the Word of God alone which will win souls. That is our true "drawing card." When we talk with visitors after the service, we are only politely interested in how nice they thought the building looked or how fine a speaker they felt the pastor was (extremely politely interested in that). We are much more concerned that they be impressed by the Word of God which they heard that morning.

We also are in existence to administer the Sacraments. Here again, we tend to think that this is the special province of the pastor alone, with occasional help from male teachers or the elders or deacons. (You know, for all the areas of congregational endeavor that we expect the pastor to do alone, we really ought to give him a nice raise!) But in fact, the pastor serves only as the public arm of the congregation when it comes to the Sacraments, and it is the responsibility of the entire congregation that they be used in a decent and God pleasing fashion.

The whole congregation should recognize in the Sacraments an opportunity to grow in grace to the glory of God. Baptism makes us His children; Communion assures us that through Christ's death all our sins are forgiven. Our congre-

gation ought to be diligent in its use of the Sacraments. No member should feel embarrassed about asking another member why he has been a stranger from the Lord's Table, or about why he is waiting so long for the baptism of his baby. The congregation ought also to recognize the binding force of the Sacraments. Paul speaks of how the fact that we all received the same Baptism and partake of the same Lord's Supper is a unifying factor in the church. We were all baptized into the same Triune God; we all receive the same body and blood of Christ in Communion. Won't these facts far outweigh the differences that surface in any congregation and which at times threaten to tear it apart?

And it also stands to reason that every member of the congregation will know what the congregation's beliefs and practices are in connection with the Sacraments. If someone asked us, could we tell them why we baptize babies when other church bodies do not? If a visitor asked us why he was not invited to our communion table, could we come up with a better answer than, "That's our policy" or "You'd have to ask the pastor about that"?

Along with the proper use of the Word and Sacraments, we also have other goals to pursue, subsidiary to the Gospel. We will actively promote Christian education, so that all our members may know that Gospel well. We will promote Christian stewardship, so that we will all serve God with our lives and whatever gifts He has given us. We will promote Christian fellowship, in order to strengthen the bonds between us and our fellow Christians. We will practice Christian evangelism, so that others may hear the Gospel we enjoy. We will encourage lives of Christian virtue among us, and call back those who are straying into sin or indifference.

You will note, however, that I don't mention numerical growth as a goal of the congregation. There are those who feel that one of the greatest purposes of the congregation is to add as many people to the membership roster as possible. If there is no such phenomenal growth, they feel that the

congregation is a failure. Well, let's not get complacent when our adult confirmations are in the single digits year after year, but let's also not take responsibility for more than we should.

When the book of Acts reports such church growth, it generally attributes it to the Holy Ghost. It is our responsibility to preach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments and to do all that we can to promote and strengthen such efforts. But it is the Holy Ghost who will use these efforts of ours like a tool to add as many to our number as He wills. It may be many, it may not be many, but that is not for us to say. Our duty is just to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ loud and clear, with boldness and faithfulness.

We will avert all kinds of desparation if we think in this way. When a congregation is doing all it can, but still can't seem to get in the converts it would like, there is the tendency to think it is failing. Then we turn to ever new programs and ideas and concepts in evangelism. I'm not saying that these are wrong; I'm saying that we should not look at them as cure-alls for a situation which is really not ours to decide. Growing in grace to the glory of God means that we will recognize that our congregation is a tool of the Holy Ghost, and not His full partner in the winning of souls. Let it be the prayer and purpose of each congregation that we grow to be effective tools through which He is able to reach out to sinners with His saving grace, sinners both inside and outside the congregation.

* * * * *

2. Accomplishment

Let us now turn our attention to the accomplishment of these goals. How do we go about getting all of this done? The first thing, of course, is to pray for God's help in every part of it. It is amazing how often we forget this simplest duty of all Christians. How seldom we think to pray for our congregation! And yet such prayer is an absolute necessity. We wouldn't

want to undertake any great and important task without asking God for His help and blessing. How much more isn't this true when we talk about the mission of our congregation? After all, we are talking about immortal souls and divine truth here. If our small hands are to handle such eternal matters, let us first ask the help of Him who has assigned them to us.

Let us pray that our congregation may grow in grace. May we always be satisfied with the Word and the Sacraments, and not fall away from the pure Gospel into false belief or ungodly practices. May every member of our congregation see himself or herself as a vital part of the congregation's mission, and be convinced that the Holy Ghost has a good reason for wanting that person to be part of this congregation. May we have success, and the ability to recognize what success is--the continued striving ever better to proclaim the Gospel of God's grace to the glory of His name.

The next thing to do is go out and get a pastor. I realize that I said earlier that we should not expect the pastor to do everything, and that is true. However, this does not mean that the pastor is unnecessary. The Apostle Paul kept on appointing pastors to the congregations that he founded--often several pastors to each one. The congregation needs this man to lead in our growth in grace and in our glorifying of God.

We will obtain him by means of a divine call. Let us always realize what the call is, and what it is not. It is not a contract by which we hire a pastor for ourselves. It is a means through which the Holy Spirit allows us the privilege of assisting Him in bringing a spiritual leader to our church. We will take this seriously, and always call men who meet the standards set in God's Word, whose education and training fit them for the position, and who are willing to fill it. (By the way, this is one of the reasons we as a congregation wish to be affiliated with a synod--so that we have the resources for the proper training of pastors and teachers.)

When he arrives, we will treat him with the respect that his call deserves. Let's not start off by comparing him, uncharitably or not, to his predecessor. That is no way to grow in grace, but it is an excellent way to stagnate in the past. We will welcome him as his own man, a mixture of talent and personality which the Holy Ghost obviously wants to be with us at the present time. We will take him for what he is, and show him true appreciation.

And we might as well pay him, too. Now, each congregation decides for itself what it will pay its pastor. His salary, upkeep, and benefit package should be a reflection not only of what the congregation can afford, but also of the appreciation we have for him, and of our thanks to God for placing him among us. He will have a lot of work to do among us; it will be better for him and for us if he doesn't have to get a part-time job to help support himself and his family. On the other hand, we don't want to go overboard either, scrimping on other parts of the budget so that we can put together an exorbitant salary to lure the "cream of the crop." Perhaps the best thing to do is to look for a proper balance between his position and expertise and the average salary of his congregation. And we should always remember what Christ said to His Apostles: "He that receives you receives me." How much would we pay Christ to be our pastor? Let's not pay our actual pastor too much less. (And for Pete's sake, if anyone says, "Lord, keep him humble and we'll keep him poor," get him off the budget committee!)

Of course, there is more to the proper upkeep of a pastor than salary, housing and health insurance. We want him to give us spiritual nourishment; he should be able to expect some of the same from us. I don't mean that we lecture him on his Catechism studies or his sermon work. I mean we show him our support. A minister will have more than enough problems to handle in a congregation. We can help him by not being one of them, by faithfully coming to church and Bible class, by living according to God's Word. Thus we show him

that his labor is not in vain. And when his dealings in certain difficult cases become known, we can trust to his judgement rather than join the chorus of those who want to second-guess him.

We can also keep open the lines of communication with him. Since he is responsible for our souls, we must keep him abreast of those things which threaten to damage us spiritually. Do you know how tough it is on him when he is left out in the cold on matters that he should be helping you deal with? When he has to hear things through the grapevine and never can act on them because it is wrong to believe such rumors? When the first time he hears about your family troubles is when your teenager runs away? When the first time he hears about your marital problems is when he reads about your divorce in the evening paper? Let's not keep from him those things he needs to know if he is to fulfill his obligation to us and our Savior to keep our souls safe. It will hamper the congregation's growth in grace if the pastor is only first let in on such matters when they are so far gone that there is almost no hope for solving them. It eats away at the pastor, and hampers his effectiveness in the other areas of his ministry.

Of course, one of the best ways to help him will be to do something that we usually don't think of. That is testing him. Let's not be the kind of a congregation that just sits docilely and accepts absolutely everything that the pastor has to say. Of course we trust him to preach only what is in the Word of God, but if he should begin to stray from it at all, we could do him no better favor than to speak to him about it. This will mean, of course, that we will have to know the Word of God rather well. This means coming to Bible Class and the occasional adult course to refresh our knowledge of the Bible. This will mean studying it on our own, as well. And don't be afraid to speak to him about what he preaches; most ministers are overjoyed to explain what they meant in their sermons (for one thing, it proves someone was listening).

Also, remember to go to him first with such questions and concerns. If you're not sure you liked what he had to say about the Antichrist or infant Baptism, go and speak to him alone rather than talking about it with all kinds of other people. If you start a groundswell of discontent with what the pastor has to say, he won't hear about it until it has spread through the entire congregation. By then, a split has started between him and his flock, and perhaps for nothing more than a misunderstanding. (Do you think this won't happen? In a religion class I taught at an area Lutheran high school in Wisconsin, the lesson was about other church bodies. I decided to nip any trouble in the bud by saying, "Now, listen carefully, because I don't want anyone going and saying, 'Schallert says all Catholics are going to hell!'" During the next weeks I kept getting less-than-happy feedback from some of the Catholic transfer students at the school for saying that they were going to go to hell.)

Finally, don't put too great a load on him. Some pastors seem to thrive on that, you know. The more time they have to spend on the job, the more dedicated they feel. But if he is serving a congregation of 1,000 communicants and has no assistant and no secretarial help, then you'd better know that he is spending more time on the job than is healthy for a human being. He can only do so much, after all, and the more work he has the less well can he do any of it. If he is swamped with a lot of work that laypeople ought to be doing, or with the great press of spiritual work which requires that he be at least two people at once to handle it all, then the congregation will not grow in grace at all. Things will slip because there is only one man to do them and it is physically impossible for him to do them all. The condition of the congregation will go into a downward spiral.

Instead of this, why not fork over a little more money (yes, it all costs money, but what better way to spend it?) and hire a secretary or get a vicar or call an assistant? If the congregation is big enough to need such help, it

is big enough to afford it. And we can't afford to have our spiritual leader tired out and emotionally drained from the heavy workload. How shall we grow in grace, and how is God glorified, when our pastor is run down and unable to function to the best of his abilities?

This brings us to the next duty of the congregation that is serious about growing in grace to the glory of God. We must establish and maintain a church council as well as the various boards of the church. These committees must work--not just have meetings--so that the pastor is not saddled with everything. Even Moses, as able a man as he was, had to heed his father-in-law's advice that he delegate some of the work in the congregation of Israel to others. This is what the council and the boards are for.

It will be helpful for the members of each committee to remember the purpose of the congregation: "Grow in grace...to Him be the glory." This will help to emphasize for us the importance of everything we do. We need to do this again and again because church work is not like the regular job. It lacks the sense of urgency we expect in important undertakings. On the job you have to work fast and get results quick. Church work just doesn't usually move at such a pace. The back wall of my church waited fourteen years between the primer and the second coat of paint (we couldn't decide on a color). No one complained. It would be easy to let important things slide and not take them very seriously. But if we realize the important part that each board plays in leading our congregation to fulfill its goal, then we will be able the better to push ourselves to accomplish our tasks.

The board of trustees, for example, seems to have the most menial of jobs. Early Christian congregations used to meet in the catacombs of Rome, and they thrived. So the chances are that if the storm windows don't get put up this winter Christianity will survive anyway. But if every trustee remembers that this building was erected to the glory of God, to serve as His embassy to the

community, then they will all realize how important what they do is, and feel the need to do it as well as they can. It is God's house; they are its caretakers. They won't let it come to resemble a weather-beaten old barn lost among the weeds.

The board of elders or deacons is to help the pastor in the spiritual oversight of the congregation. They have a lot of work to do. Delinquency, divorce, fightings, drug abuse, all kind of things that the pastor has to deal with are better handled with others to help and support him. It can be a relief to him as he passes by a certain member's house to know that one or two of the elders are hard at work trying to help him. It will be helpful if the elders can always remember their goal of leading people to live godly lives to the glory of our Savior. It makes it easier to make those delinquent calls and to deal with those living in public sin.

The stewardship committee takes a lead in our growth and in our glorifying God with our gifts. They are to train the congregation in using what we have for God. Some such committees concentrate almost exclusively on offerings of money, but it is better if they realize that they should show how we use everything in our lives to grow in grace to the glory of God. As was mentioned before, our time and abilities also should be given to the Lord for the work of His Church; the stewardship committee ought to keep reminding us of that.

The evangelism committee is quite obviously a leader in our growth (not numerical; we went through that earlier). They will be the ones to plan and coordinate any congregation-wide outreach with the Gospel. They ought also to keep encouraging us as individuals to share the good news with others. How better to glorify God than to tell abroad the wonders of His name? Here especially we need to recognize true success. This committee is not a failure if only two or three people join the church after a big drive. They are only a failure if they do nothing to invite others to hear the Gospel.

Growth in grace is the name of the game for the board of education. They see to it that our faith is more firmly grounded in the knowledge of the Bible and of the Lord Jesus Christ. They have their work cut out for them, trying all they can to find the best ways to shore up the members' knowledge of true biblical teaching (especially the children's). But they can rest assured in the knowledge that the Bible spurs us on in many places to teach thoroughly the entire counsel of God. And as they help us grow in knowledge, they are also helping us grow in grace and in faith.

Even positions as seemingly "non-spiritual" as the recording secretary and the treasurer contribute to the spiritual mission of the congregation. After all, it is the Lord's business that the secretary records, and the Lord's money that the treasurer collects and spends. Such men are necessary; without them, the congregation could not function, and there would be no growth in grace at all.

There will be other boards and other positions, no doubt. Some congregations are loaded with them. You need them, but you mustn't abuse them. It is too easy to say, "Well, let the board handle it. The lawn needs cutting--that is what we have trustees for. The giving is down--that's stewardship's baby. People aren't coming to church--that is elders' work." We can't leave all the work of the church to the elected officers and officials. Rather, volunteer to help them. Don't wait until they have to come around asking for assistance. Let them know that you are ready and willing at any time to help with anything where the Lord has given you knowledge and expertise. It hardly reflects well on our growth in grace, and hardly glorifies God, if 95% of the work in our congregation is left to the 5% of the members who are on the committees!

One more thing about these elected positions: don't be afraid to run for them. Boards don't just happen by themselves, you know; Christian men have to come forward and fill these positions. In some congregations, it would be

easier to find volunteers to sing "God Bless America" in downtown Teheran than to run for elder or treasurer. But God's glory will be enhanced greatly when His people willingly come forward to offer their services, and don't hold themselves back because they don't trust the abilities which He has given them.

Now that we have the pastor in the pulpit, and the council around the meeting table, let's put a roof over their heads. An important part of growth in grace to the glory of God is the buying and maintaining, if the congregation can afford it, of a church building and grounds. Even the tiniest mission congregation meeting in the basement of the VFW hall wants its own building. Now I mentioned earlier that the early Church didn't think that way. They had to hide their services from view during times of persecution, and found their way into the catacombs (where, nevertheless, they did paint religious symbols on the walls). Our congregation has no need to hide, and every reason to strive for visibility.

It is important for the congregation to have a place of worship that it can be pleased with. For one thing, our spiritual concentration is much easier in a church building than in the local school gymnasium with the tattered basketball nets hanging over the altar. For another, the building gives the congregation a more or less permanent "presence" in the community. It lets them know that we are here to stay. That is important. There are enough of these "fly-by-night" religious figures out there who breeze into town, rent a hall, hold a week's worth of meetings to fleece the flock, and then leave. If we stay in the place where we start, and build and establish ourselves, that will accomplish two things. For one, it will make the community see that we are really serious--we truly believe that we have something of such importance for the community that we are going to stay and broadcast it. For the other, it will reflect, in an imperfect way, the eternity of the matters we deal with, the everlasting nature of our endeavors.

What I mean is this. Some will tell you that since it is spiritual wares we deal in, the earthly matter of whether or not we have a church building around us is unimportant. That all sounds very good and evangelical; who really believes it? Until the spiritual sight of everyone in our congregation and in our community is such that, without any church building, they can all discern the spiritual and eternal nature of what our congregation does, until then we'd better be thinking of pews and steeples and stained glass windows.

And in that connection, let's not be like those who despise the very idea of decorating a house of worship. Certain Reformed groups have historically seemed to hold that anything more ornamental than varnish on the pews was the sin of making a graven image. Even outside that fellowship, there have always been those who look with grave suspicion on attempts to bring anything remotely ornate or expensive into the church. They will often argue that our money ought to go to missions in foreign lands or some such cause rather than to the beautification of our houses of worship.

Well, of course we should be supporting the missions heavily with our offerings. But we should also beautify the house of the Lord. How many of us would live in a house where the paint is peeling, the carpet is faded from twenty years of sunlight, the windows are cracked, and there isn't so much as a picture hanging on the walls? We do up our own houses to make them attractive and pleasant; why not the Lord's? We design and furnish them to make a "statement" about ourselves (the yuppies' living room says, "We're successful," the young woman's frilly bedroom says, "I'm still a little girl at heart," the teen's bedroom says, "Help! There's a carpet buried alive down here!"). With our decoration of the house of God, we wish to proclaim, "This is a place where heaven reaches down and touches the earth. This is a place where the glory of God is reflected for men on earth. This is the house of the Lord." Remember the Lord's own instructions in the book of Exodus for the way He wanted His

house of worship built--golden walls, finely woven veils, skillfully crafted candlesticks and basins. I think we can be excused, then, for spending some money on stained glass windows or new carpeting.

Perhaps the greatest growth in grace will come through the maintaining of a truly efficient system of education in the congregation. It will need the full support of the congregation, too. Some aspects of it call for volunteers, others for money, and if the congregation can't come up with either, then the education will suffer.

There are two parts of this effort that are usually the special province of the pastor. The first is confirmation instructions, for adults as well as for children. After all, confirmation is the time when a person dedicates himself body and soul to uphold the teachings of his church. The congregation which will ask that of a person must be sure the person knows what he is getting into. It will do no good if, somewhere down the line, the confirmand suddenly is faced with a doctrine that he didn't realize was believed and taught in this congregation. What becomes of his confirmation vow, then?

Although this is generally the pastor's show, the rest of the congregation is not shut out from it. Especially if it is your son or daughter, niece or nephew, grandson or granddaughter in the confirmation class, you can take an active role in confirmation instructions. Don't just leave it to the pastor to make sure they learn; you drill your children in their lessons yourself. And if you say, "Well, I don't know these things that well," then shame on you, get down your Catechism, enroll in the adult class right now, and get cracking. And don't hesitate to drill the children on their memory work, either. The congregation will end up with more than one member who knows something from the Bible.

The rest of the congregation also has a part in confirmation instructions. We can encourage the young people in their studies. At confirmation we can

personally welcome them into communicant membership (one way is by having a congregational reception for the confirmation class). And we can support the pastor's efforts to instruct the children thoroughly in Lutheran doctrine. (If he wants to pass up the time-honored custom of confirming the class on Palm Sunday, don't be a stickler for tradition. Do you know how early Palm Sunday has been coming lately, and how many class periods the pastor would have to condense, especially if he only has the class for an hour or two each week?) Impress on the children the importance of confirmation class by being an example on the importance of church attendance and communion. Their junior high schools will offer enough after-hours activities to make scheduling a confirmation class a true headache, and the children will be tempted to drop out of the class or feel that it is an intrusion on their free time. If they see the rest of their congregation making similar sacrifices to come to every church service, even the mid-week ones, they will be more likely to make the Word of God their number one priority, too. They will grow in grace very well.

The other area of education that is primarily the pastor's duty is the Bible class. In some congregations, however, he would really do better to apply himself to something that is more generally appreciated, like mowing the lawn or shovelling the sidewalk. Why is it that so many of our adults and confirmed youth think that Bible class is merely optional? Why do they feel little or no desire to get a more indepth look at the Bible and doctrine and church history and Christian guidelines than can be gained from the Sunday morning sermon?

I know that there is merit to the statement, "Instead of grouching about the ones who aren't there, teach the ones who are." But when only one out of every ten confirmed members of our congregations comes to Bible Class (that was the average in our District last year, 10%), one can't help but recall the Savior's words when only one healed leper returned to thank Him: "Where are the nine?"

Does growth in grace to the glory of God mean so little among us? Is the congregation content to risk stagnating in its ignorance of the Word of God? The 119th Psalm is filled with 176 verses of delight in learning all the psalmist can of the Word of the Lord. If just ten percent of his spirit and enthusiasm were to enter into our congregations, then you would see growth in grace like you've never seen before.

There are also the educational agencies that rely on lay volunteers to continue: Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and the like. Will our congregation be one which sets such store by the spiritual growth of our children that many people will flock to the call? Or will it be one in which the minister or the board of education is reduced to phoning around with one week to go before the school opening, desperately seeking another teacher or two, another helper or three?

What is necessary is a full congregational commitment to its children's growth in grace, and the will to do all that is necessary (and more) to accomplish that. The congregation that has a Sunday School and a VBS and is completely satisfied with just that should ask itself, "Is it true that there is nothing more that we can do? Or could we expend our time, energy, and money even more than we are doing right now?"

Of course, I am talking about the Lutheran day school. I know what you're thinking: that's an expensive proposition. If the congregation hasn't got one yet, the costs of starting one can seem astronomical. If the congregation does have one, it is sometimes distressing to see how it eats away at more and more of the budget of the whole church.

Perhaps, though, we will do well to remember the early Lutheran congregations in our land, and how, poor as they were, the second thing they wanted after founding their congregation was a Lutheran school for their children. They were ready and willing to make many a personal sacrifice to insure that

their congregation would have a day school. What it comes down to very often is the question of where we wish to invest the money we have--in the things of this world, or in the souls of our children?

Of course, support for such a school is not always as strong as it ought to be. There will be those who feel, "I don't have any kids in the school; why should I support it?" Others will say, "The public school can teach them earthly things, and the spiritual they can get in Sunday School." And there are always parents who will send their children to the public school because of its better classes in woodshop or computers or swimming.

But this all misses the point. We are talking about the souls entrusted into the care of our congregation; they are all "our kids." And the public school is not going to teach them about the Bible, about their Lord. The Sunday School and confirmation class are all fine and good, but they can't do the job as well as the parochial school. All signs point us to having a Lutheran school if it is at all possible, if we consider ourselves a congregation and a solid group that is vitally concerned about the spiritual welfare of everyone in the congregation.

There has to be wide-spread support because of the hugeness of such an undertaking. There have to be the facilities--rooms, desks, books, and all the rest. There also have to be the workers--custodians, kitchen workers, and others, some volunteer and some salaried. And the salaries must be fair, and we must hire enough people to get the jobs done right.

Now, not every parish will be able to afford such an expense. But surely they can afford to assist parents by helping to pay the tuition of the children in the schools of our sister congregations, if not pick up the whole cost. And certainly they can strive for the day when they might be able to open a school of their own. It is a sad day when our entire Synod reported no new school openings last year--none at all! Wasn't there even one congregation in our

1,194 that was ready and able to make this great commitment to the souls of its youth?

The congregation which still doesn't believe in the superiority of full-time Christian education over its part-time counterparts of Sunday School and VBS is a congregation that needs to grow--in common sense as well as in grace. Test the Bible knowledge of the children who only have Sunday School for their religious education; beyond a few very familiar Bible stories, they won't know very much. They won't have much knowledge of Old Testament history, or the difference between the old covenant and the new one ushered in by Christ. They'll have only the slightest inkling of the teachings of Christ. They'll have almost no idea of who the Apostle Paul was. How can they? They get such lessons only once a week (if their parents are diligent about bringing them, that is). That very fact is an obstacle to their learning these things. What is the balance of their educational lives? Approximately 30 hours a week in public school, learning earthly things, to one hour in Sunday School! What impression is that bound to leave for the child? That religious education is not nearly as important as the earthly, that math facts are more important than memorizing passages, that American history is more important than the life of Christ. If the congregation is satisfied to allow that impression to remain uncontested, there will be minimal growth in grace; they'll be fortunate to be in existence in two or three generations.

So let's consider it a settled question whether or not a parochial school is a desirable goal for the congregation that seriously wants to grow in grace to the glory of God. The mere existence of the Lutheran school in the congregation, however, is no guarantee of brighter times ahead if the congregation doesn't give it the full support it deserves. And this means that the teachers need the congregation's full support.

We extend a call to our teachers that is no less divine than that extended to the pastor. And the way we treat them will affect the way that they are able to fulfill that call. Do the men and women on the faculty get a truly fair salary, with no improper distinctions made between the sexes? (No one is still starting the men off at a higher salary base simply because they are men, are they?) Do we even approach what they could get in the public schools, or what we are paid ourselves? Do we support their work with our prayers and trust? Or do we gossip about them and backbite them when they give our little Einsteins a "D" in math, or don't choose them for the basketball team? Do we overwork them? Some congregations have been known to treat their teachers like called slaves; is our congregation going to be like that? Do we give them proper vacations, and respect their professional judgment enough to let them decide how and when they will prepare for the coming school year? (I have heard of some congregations--not in this District, by the way--which insist that the teachers put in full work days at the school during summer vacation. That's crazy. Before you vote at the voters' meeting to make them do that, you put in nine months of ten to sixteen hour days working with children and with the work of children, and then tell me that you look forward to spending the summer sitting in your classroom.) In short, what was said about pastors can also be said about teachers--treat them the way you would treat the Lord? If Jesus were the fifth and sixth grade teacher in our school, how much would we pay Him, and what kind of vacation would we grant Him?

The parents in the congregation will deal the most with the teachers, and so it falls most to them to reflect the congregation's commitment to the call and the work of the teachers. If the teacher needs to see you about your son or daughter, drop everything and talk to him. Assist the teacher; make your child do his homework, study his memory work, recite to you. Show true interest in your child's work at school, especially the religious lessons, so that

your child can see how important his Christian education is to you, and how much store you set by his teacher's endeavors.

And that last comment goes for the whole congregation, as well. Show how much you appreciate the school in your midst. Go to the children's concerts, show up at their basketball games and spelling bees, compliment them when their class sings in church, give what help you can to the school whenever they need it, attend the graduation--even if you have no children enrolled. Remember again, all the children in the congregation are "our kids." Show them that you feel that way, and we'll see them more ready to assume an active role in the congregation as adults.

We turn next to something that has been hinted at earlier. To grow in grace to the glory of God, our congregation will keep up its membership in the Synod. First of all, we do so because this pleases God. The fragmentation of Christianity today has to be a source of sorrow to Him. If there is no need to be separate, then we owe it to Him to unite with those other congregations with whom we agree in doctrine and practice.

From an earthly viewpoint, there are many practical reasons for membership in the Synod. Worker training was hinted at earlier. When we need to call a pastor or teacher, we want to be sure that he or she will teach and live according to God's Word. Where will they be trained in this? Not at the public colleges, and not at the seminaries of other church bodies. Only if we have the will to continue the training of our own workers will we have the assurance that there will continue to be a supply (God willing) of those who can truly lead us to grow in grace to the glory of God.

Another reason is financial reality. In days gone by one congregation may have been able to maintain a number of foreign missionaries, or train its own future pastor. But in our day, the costs of such things are beyond the reach of most of even our richest congregations. So we pool our resources with the

other congregations in our synod to support a wide variety of such endeavors-- worker training, mission work at home and abroad, relations with other church bodies, and the like. All these things are worth our attention and time and prayers and money, since they all serve the same purpose as our own congregation--testifying to the Gospel.

I know how easy it can be to gripe about "them" over there in Milwaukee. It is especially easy when "they" come out with another "special offering." But the Synod is not "they"--it is us. Perhaps if all our congregations who come together as a synod were more willing to contribute freely to our mission as a synod, our elected administrators would not have to resort to these special offerings. Furthermore, should we really be concentrating only on such things? Is it right to exclude from our reckoning all the good that we accomplish through our synodical affiliation, and only speak about the things that cause friction? Would not our congregation do better to keep itself informed of everything we are doing as a synod on a regular basis?

Will our congregation show an interest in the affairs of the Synod? Or do we feel that none of that has anything to do with us? Anniversaries, dedications, college and seminary graduations, even the simple task of subscribing to the Northwestern Lutheran--are these outside our congregation's interest? It isn't growing in grace to stick our heads in the sand like the ostrich and assume that our little corner of Christendom is the only one worthy of our notice.

However, there are still things for us to do in our corner. One of these is continuing to reach out to the community around us--evangelism. After all, the Gospel was not just given for us Lutherans; it is for all mankind. And there are few cities or villages with our congregations in them where there is no one who does not need to hear Christ's invitation to eternal life.

How is this outreach to be done? There are many ways. One extremely wrong way is to leave it all to the pastor and the evangelism committee. You

know, as necessary as these committees may be, they can be a trap. People think they are there to do all the work. The evangelism committee leads us in this outreach; so does the pastor. When you think about it, though, the most effective "evangelists" in any congregation will be the laypeople. They have more personal contacts with the unchurched than the pastor. Even if his church is only moderately large, the pastor will find himself so involved in the matters of the congregation that, except for a few mission calls, he spends all his time with people who are already members. And though mission calls are fine, it is more likely that a person will be impressed by the Gospel if a friend speaks to him about the Lord rather than a pastor who can be perceived as "just doing his job."

It is a growth in grace to bring others to the Lord. We do this by inviting them to come to church with us, inviting them to get to know the pastor (by the way, instead of saying, "Pastor, would you visit so and so?" why not help break the ice by going along to introduce him?), telling them of the hope that is in us. A congregation where most if not all the members realize that it is to each of us, not just to the pastor and the evangelism committee, that Christ gave His great commission, will be a true force for the spread of the Gospel in its community. Thus the glory of God is proclaimed in our town, and others are invited to come and grow in grace with us.

Another kind of growth comes when the congregation promotes Christian living among its members. We all have some influence in this. By our example we can show the youth and the new members how an adult Christian acts, speaks, and lives. By a word of encouragement, we can reinforce such behavior in others (for example, complimenting the new confirmand when he comes to the spring clean-up). And we can speak to those who are slipping. We need not be afraid to warn a brother or sister in the congregation when we see them slipping into sin or indifference to the Word of God. We surely don't want to leave it for

the pastor and the elders alone to handle. God saw to it that congregations are made up of more than just pastors and elders, so that we all could watch out for each other. When He allows this sin to come to my attention, it means I am the member He wants to deal with it first.

On the flip side of this, if I am the one requiring admonition, I should take it well. If something in my life does not square with the Gospel, and a fellow member (or the elders) have to speak to me about it, rather than tell them to butt out, I hope I would have the Christian good sense to thank them. If our congregation could be like this, where everyone is vitally concerned about the souls of everyone else and has the courage to step in and speak when it is needed, then we will grow in grace all the more, not having to lose the occasional branch or two which could have been salvaged.

Hand in hand with this comes the matter of Christian fellowship. Let's not be a congregation of strangers. Of course, there is such a thing as shyness; you may not be able to just go up and join in every conversation that goes on in the narthex. But there is also unintentional rudeness. Remember that these are the people you plan to spend eternity with; now is the time to make their acquaintance, and to show that you are concerned about them and are happy that they are your brothers and sisters in Christ. The congregation has many things set up for such fellowship: men's clubs, ladies' aid, Pioneers, special dinners and the like. Let us as a congregation take advantage of these opportunities to grow together.

And let us not forget acts of charity. God's Word spurs us on again and again to such deeds of kindness, "especially to those who are of the household of faith." If we see a fellow member down on his luck, let's help him out. In the early days of the church, this was a matter of course--the have's were more than ready to help the have-not's. May it be that way among us, too. Let our congregation be ready to take care of its own.

We are at the point now where this could turn into a grab-bag of separate ideas on how the congregation is to grow spiritually. Rather than deal with any more specific areas, I will mention one general one. It may be one of the most obvious. The congregation should know what it is all about, what it stands for and teaches, what it believes. Every member of our congregation ought to know what we teach, and be able to defend our beliefs from the Holy Scriptures. Why do we oppose the lodge and scouting? Why don't we have a chaplain in the military? Why do we practice close communion and infant baptism? Why do we use modern language Bibles instead of the King James Version? Why do we change the colors of the altar paraments? We should be ready to answer any question about the way our congregation operates, worships, teaches, and believes. We should all be ready to serve as spokesmen for our congregation. If we are growing properly in grace, this will inevitably follow.

* * * * *

"Grow in grace...to God be the glory." That is the purpose of the Lutheran congregation. That is what we strive to do. That is the reason for our existence. And it is the gift and privilege which God has given to us.

This essay has examined many, but by no means all, the ways that the congregation might strive to attain this goal (the idea of buying new suits for all the members was merely touched upon, for example). Some of these suggestions you can probably take or leave; others may work in one congregation and not in another. But no matter the differences between parishes, may this burning zeal be within each member of each congregation, and be the moving and driving force behind all that we do: to grow in grace to the glory of Him who bought us to be His own at the price of His own blood.