

Factors Leading to the Development of Staff Ministry in the WELS

Senior Church History Paper
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Staff Ministry is an exciting new development in the WELS. Throughout much of the history of the WELS, if a young man wanted to serve his Lord in the public ministry he had only two choices. He could study to become a pastor or a teacher. A woman really had only one; she could study to become a Lutheran elementary teacher. There were not really any other options. Things have changed. More options have opened up to men and women who want to serve in the public ministry. Today WELS members have the option of studying to be a staff minister whose ministry is more focused and specialized.

There are many different factors that led to the development of staff ministry in the WELS. In this paper we will be content to examine just three of those factors. 1) The development of the doctrine of Ministry in the WELS 2) The 1983 resolution “that we encourage the Conference of Presidents to continue the study of additional forms of ministry and their impact on our synod’s congregations and worker training schools.”¹ 3) The joint committee’s 1991 Report and Recommendation on Staff Ministry.

In the WELS the doctrine of Ministry has been ^{studied} treated by every generation as it struggled with applying the doctrine. The WELS present ^{view} of the doctrine of ministry grew out of the efforts made by the Seminary faculty during the years 1909-1918.² In earlier decades there had been many different views within the WELS regarding the doctrine of Ministry.

¹ 1983 BoRaM, p.192

² J.P. Koehler, History of the Wisconsin Synod (St. Cloud, MN: Sentinel Publishing Co. for the Protestant Conference, 1970) pg. 230.

Around the turn of the century most of the discussion regarding ministry had to deal with the teacher's call. Because of a lack of exegetical and historical work, some put forth the idea that the pastor was the only divinely instituted form. They held that the calling of a teacher was dependent on the call of the pastor. Without the pastor there could be no Lutheran teacher. Others made the call of the teacher dependent on the parents, who were instructed to bring up their children in the training and admonition of the Lord. J.P. Koehler throughout the last decades of the 1800's combated these false views even when it led him to contradict Director Schaller of the Seminary who held to one of these wrong views in a 1909 conference.³ Later Schaller, Pieper, and Koehler would all stand together as they clarified the doctrine of the Ministry. After thorough study, what did these Wauwatosa theologians set forth as the doctrine of the Ministry? Koehler at a synod-wide pastoral conference in September of 1911 had the following words to say about the doctrine of the Ministry:

The same mode of interpretation must be applied in explaining the Lord's parting statements instituting the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments. Matthew 28:18-20 and Mark 16:15-16. It is just that, and not the creation of a certain office, attached to certain ordained persons, or a distinct clerical order, or of any specified forms of carrying out that ministry to the entire world. It comprehends the entire work of the New Testament church, and the Keys are again alluded to in the words: 'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.' This ministry, in its human forms, is no longer, as a matter of New Testament liberty, tied to the Old Testament ceremonial law, though that doesn't spell freedom to do things contrary to the will of God or without the prompting of the Holy Ghost; it means that Christians are free to organize and carry on their ministry according to the moral values that are inherent in the concept of the fellowship that is sanctified by communion with our Lord and Savior.⁴

³ Ibid. pg. 232.

⁴ Ibid. pg. 237.

All synod statements about the doctrine of Ministry that followed this statement by J.P. Koehler in 1911 would be consistent with it. They would stress that while the ministry has been instituted, the forms have not been divinely instituted. The forms of ministry are created to serve a specific need. Half a century and more later, the scriptural truths concerning Ministry were still being proclaimed in the WELS. In 1967 our Synod printed the Theses on Church and Ministry. In point 6 of section D we confessed:

There is, however, no direct word of institution for any particular form of the public ministry. The one public ministry of the Gospel may assume various forms, as circumstances demand. Acts 6:1-6. The specific forms in which Christians establish the public ministry have not been prescribed by the Lord to His New Testament Church. It is the Holy Spirit who through the gift of their common faith leads the believers to establish the adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation, and need. Various functions are mentioned in Scripture; 1 Tim. 4:13; Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:28; Rom. 12:6-8; 2 Tim. 2:2; John 21:15-17 (feeding); Acts 20:28 (watching); 1 Tim. 3:2; 4:11; 6:2 (teaching); 1 Tim. 3:5; 5:17 (ruling). In spite of the great diversity in the external form of the ministerial work, the ministry is essentially one. The various offices for the public preaching of the Gospel, not only those enumerated above, e.g., in Eph. 4:11 and 1 Cor. 12:28, but also those developed in our day, are all gifts of the exalted Christ to His Church which the Church receives gratefully and with due regard for love and order employs under the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit for the upbuilding under the general commission to preach the Gospel given to all believers.⁵

When discussing the factors that lead to the development of Staff Ministry in the WELS, the development of the doctrine of Ministry is extremely important. The correct understanding of Scripture with regard to the ministry allows the church to create different forms to carry out the work of sharing the gospel. If the WELS had

⁵ Proceedings of the Thirty-ninth Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1967, pg. 289-290.

continued to hold on to those false views of ministry, I sincerely doubt that a Staff Ministry program would exist in this synod.

In 1983 the WELS took a step towards Staff Ministry. 1983 was a synod convention year. That year as the synod met in convention something changed. It was not our doctrine of the Ministry that changed but rather how we applied that doctrine. For a good number of years, we had recognized that the Bible taught that we are free to create forms of ministry as the needs arose. We had never really thought about creating new forms of ministry until 1983.

President Carl Mischke in the conclusion of his President's report gave a little foreshadowing to what a floor committee would resolve later that convention. Mischke wrote:

Along with it He has given us almost unlimited opportunities to proclaim that Word. He has given us a rich supply of well-trained pastors and teachers eager to do so. He may well be calling us to increased activity in other forms of ministry so that we may seize the opportunities He sets before us. And He has also placed into our hands the financial resources needed to carry out the mission He has entrusted to us. Under the guidance and blessing of a gracious God we may well be standing on the threshold of a new and vigorous thrust in reaching out to the world with the Word.⁶

In his report, President Mischke hinted at one of the reasons why increased activity in other forms of ministry was at hand. The Wisconsin Synod desired to share the Gospel in any and every way that was in harmony with God's will. As a synod we were beginning to realize that there were many opportunities to share God's word that were not seized. It seemed that we had a need for other forms of ministry.

⁶ Proceedings of the Forty-seventh Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1983, pg. 30.

Floor committee No. 4 had the responsibility of dealing with the President's Report. The floor committee resolved "that we encourage the conference of presidents to continue the study of additional forms of ministry and their impact on our synod's congregations and worker training schools."⁷ They had several reasons for making such a resolution. It was becoming increasingly difficult for congregations to carry out their ministry because things had changed. Congregations had a much broader scope of ministry. They were more programs, more Bible classes, more counseling. This made a great demand on the pastor's time. Additional forms of ministry might be helpful in carrying out the objectives of the synod's congregations.

The floor committee also felt it was proper to make such a resolution because there was already discussion started on additional forms of ministry. At that time, the synod had discussions regarding ministers of Christian education. In addition because we knew our teaching regarding ministry was in line with the Bible the men from the floor committee were confident that the Lord would keep his promises and bless such and increased ministry of the gospel.⁸

The resolution to continue to study additional forms of ministry was a major factor in the development of Staff Ministry in the WELS. For the first time the synod realized a need for additional forms of ministry and took steps to fill those needs.

Another major factor in the development of Staff Ministry in the WELS was the 1991 Report and Recommendation on Staff Ministry by the joint committee. In the

⁷ Proceedings of the Forty-seventh Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1983, pg. 41-42.

⁸ Proceedings of the Forty-seventh Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1983, pg. 41.

eight years following the '83 convention many people worked hard to carry out the resolution of the '83 convention. Committees from the Conference of Presidents, the Board for Parish Services, and the Board for Worker Training worked diligently on the matter. As a joint committee they came before the synod in convention with a detailed report on the role of the Staff Minister in the WELS, a description of such ministry, and a planned program of preparation for such ministry.⁹

The synod adopted the following resolution concerning Staff Ministry:

- WHEREAS 1) several congregations of our synod have already created staff ministry positions; and
- WHEREAS 2) other congregations are contemplating the formation of staff ministry positions; and
- WHEREAS 3) there is an increasing need for specialized help to enhance the total ministry of a growing number of congregations; and
- WHEREAS 4) this need has led church councils and the Conference of Presidents to recommend a staff ministry program; and
- WHEREAS 5) the proposed staff ministry program is in accord with the Word of God; and
- WHEREAS 6) the WELS itself has created a variety of ministerial offices to meet the needs and opportunities of contemporary ministry, e.g., mission counselors, administrators; and
- WHEREAS 7) decency and order require theological training and certification of candidates in this form of public ministry; therefore, be it
- Resolved, that the synod adopt the proposed staff ministry program.¹⁰

I believe that the synod adopted this resolution because of the fine work done in the Report and Recommendation on Staff Ministry. This Report clearly showed that

⁹ BoRaM 1991, pg.175.

¹⁰ Proceedings of the Fifty-first Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1991, pg. 94-95.

Staff Ministry is in accord with God's will. It demonstrated that the men and women coming out of this program would be qualified to serve in their respective ministries.

The future will be an exciting time in the WELS. The Lord has blessed our synod with several staff ministers at the present time and God willing he will supply our synod with even more in the future. These staff ministers will be a blessing to our synod as they help congregations to carry out their gospel ministries.