

A Biblical and Contemporary Philosophy of Ministry

[Dakota/Montana District Convention at St. Martin Lutheran Church,
Watertown, South Dakota; June 21 to 23, 1933]

By Paul E. Kelm

The “letters” column of the *Northwestern Lutheran* has been an interesting, if controversial, window on the sometimes divergent perspective WELS people have on life and ministry. Three examples may serve to illustrate that doctrinal unanimity no longer (if ever) assures homogeneity in the attitudes we have toward issues of ministry in contemporary culture. Perhaps the most controversial subject addressed by readers of the *Northwestern Lutheran* has been the “Sampler.” How can people who confess the same theological convictions hold such disparate opinions on the style and format of worship? Yet another hotly contested topic on the *Northwestern Lutheran*’s “letters” page was creation science. While no respondent questioned a six-day creation or verbal inspiration and inerrancy, there was clearly no unanimity in the value of and approach to apologetics. More recently readers have responded vehemently to editorial comments on the family, with the term “crippled family” and the phenomenon labeled “DINKS” drawing rhetorical heat. To explain these and other examples of strongly held though widely divergent opinions in the realm of Christian life and ministry, I’d like to introduce and elaborate the expression *philosophy of ministry*. There will be legitimate differences in philosophy of ministry among us. There may be illegitimate differences in philosophy of ministry. The intent of this essay is to focus a “Biblical and Contemporary Philosophy of Ministry.”

But let me explore first further dimensions of our philosophical differences. Beyond simple personality conflict, what explains the pastor-teacher “conflict” that has occasioned endless discussions and papers? Why are a number of WELS congregations calling “staff” ministers with specific position descriptions (e.g. “Outreach and Mercy Ministry” or “Family and Youth”), while others insist on a co-pastor arrangement that assigns each man a portion of the same, total ministry? Why do some pastors find themselves at odds with the congregation over what they do (or want to do) and why, while in other congregations the same innovations meet with little or no resistance? And why does it seem that so many congregations are rewriting their constitutions? Again, I submit, that the answers lie in what can be called “philosophy of ministry.”

A simple definition of that term is: How we view and approach ministry in general and in our setting specifically. There are a number of elements that contribute to a philosophy of ministry, both that of an individual and that of a congregation.

The major element in a congregation’s (or pastor’s, teacher’s and member’s philosophy of ministry is theology. The Lutheran emphasis on the grace of God, with objective justification the organizing principle of our theology, should be the focus for our approach to ministry. The centrality of God’s “sovereignty” in Reformed churches or the focus on the Christian’s “experience” of God in Pentecostal churches will produce an entirely different concept of ministry. Our conviction that Scripture is verbally inspired and inerrant, the sole arbiter of Christian faith and life, establishes our approach to ministry. Churches that have a conditioned view of Scripture’s inspiration and authority will logically give greater weight to reason and its derivative disciplines in organizing and practicing ministry. Because we are a creedal or confessional church with carefully and historically articulated doctrine, our approach to ministry will be far more circumscribed and delineated than that of a church whose theology is “non-denominational” consensus or “fundamentalist” (distinguishing “fundamental” doctrines from those over which dissent is tolerable). Each doctrinal conviction of a church helps to shape its philosophy of ministry; and we will explore several examples later.

Another, related element of a philosophy of ministry is priorities. Like the Wisconsin Synod, congregations typically constitutionalize a mission or purpose statement. Based on the Great

Commission and other such statements of mission in Scripture, churches and individuals define key, continuing objectives of their ministry. Among these are: evangelizing the lost, nurturing and building up the saved in their faith, applying Christian love to the needs of the faithful and demonstrating that love to those outside the faith, preserving sound doctrine and glorifying God. Seldom, if ever, however, are these objectives given equal weight and attention. Deliberate priority may be given to one or more objectives because the context of ministry requires it. For example, a new mission setting demands a priority for evangelism; there simply aren't souls to nurture and member needs to be met. A congregation experiencing doctrinal controversy will prioritize the purpose of preserving sound doctrine. (Those that prioritize "keeping peace and harmony" instead illustrate how significant priority is to not only philosophy of ministry but to the validity of ministry ultimately.) Too seldom are a congregation's priorities deliberately articulated. Over time ministry may simply entrench certain priorities—usually reflected in the budget, allocation of staff and members' time commitments and emotional commitment—because programs of ministry or crises in the congregation claim primary attention. This all-too-common phenomenon demonstrates how and why a philosophy of ministry may be more sub-conscious than intentional.

Tradition is another, significant element which shapes a philosophy of ministry. Above all, there is worship tradition. Whereas a denomination, church body or congregation may at its inception create a liturgical approach based on philosophy of ministry, after a generation or more that liturgical approach becomes a tradition that shapes philosophy of ministry. Tradition may be defined simply as "the way we do things around here." How decisions are reached may be spelled out in a constitution, but the unwritten procedure's and sensitivities probably have greater significance. And the new pastor, teacher or member had better understand these. The organizations of a church contribute a body of tradition, usually expressed in annual events which, in turn, help to shape the church's philosophy of ministry. Traditions provide a valuable sense of stability and continuity to a church's ministry. They may, however, become so strong an element of a church's philosophy of ministry that they outweigh theology and priorities, impairing the congregation's ability to respond to ministry needs and opportunities with a clear sense of mission and a careful application of truth.

Culture is a component of a philosophy of ministry that is closely related to tradition. Who we are and how we minister as a synod have roots in our northern European origins. Immigrant values, traditions and perspectives tend to survive in the ethos of a church long after the native language has been abandoned. Regional culture, too, has an impact. A church body planted in the soil of rural and small-town upper mid-western life can be expected to retain the outlook, customs, attitudes and values associated with that context. Transplanting the church into an urban, pluralistic setting means a sometimes difficult adjustment in philosophy of ministry. The Irish and Italians, Hispanics and Asians don't see life through the same lenses as Germans and Scandinavians. Johnny Reb doesn't appreciate what he perceives as "Yankee." Steel-workers haven't shared the farmer's life-style. And today's corporate and technological business world has created another whole body of culture and demographic impact. Culture is also socioeconomic. Ours has largely been a middle class church body, whose members' values, work ethic, life-style and outlook are apparent in their church's "culture." The socio-political dimension of culture, too, impacts the church. Ours is a conservative, democratic (philosophy, not party) membership, a fact carried over into the polity of our church and the attitude with which we typically approach issues. Congregations established during the past few decades in the "saltwater" regions of the country have had to contend with "culture clash" more dramatically than have older churches in the upper Midwest, where cultural change is slower. But every congregation has a philosophy of ministry colored by both the culture of its heritage and the culture of its context.

A church's religious history, too, shapes its philosophy of ministry. The most dramatic examples of this in our synod are church-fellowship-related. The dissolution of the Synodical Conference and the controversies which produced the Protestant Conference and the C. L. C. have had a profound impact on

the way we view our church and its ministry. The ecumenical, historical-critical and charismatic trends in American church life form another historical context within which we see ourselves and our ministry. The twin emphases of preserving sound doctrine and home mission expansion can be related to this historical dimension of our church body's philosophy of ministry. Ironically, that history has also produced some tension between those two emphases of preserving truth and aggressively witnessing that truth. Congregations and individuals reflect their philosophy of ministry when they emphasize one or the other. Such emphasis is a response to history as well as mission, viewed differently.

A significant, though seldom explored, dimension of a church's philosophy of ministry is our set of assumptions about the society in which and to which we minister. To what extent do people understand, respect and "own" biblical truths and values? How we answer that question for the community around us will shape the philosophy of our outreach ministry. How we answer that question for our members will shape the philosophy and nature of our nurturing, teaching ministry. How do people learn? We may not have seriously addressed the question, but our approach to Christian education, our "philosophy" of Christian education, will be premised on certain assumptions. How do people interact socially? Again, that has probably not been a major area of study. But the organizational life of our church, as well as the outreach and nurture strategies of the church, are—wittingly or unwittingly—based on assumptions about relational issues from the state of the family to the nature of friendships, associations and group dynamics. What are the needs, hurts and concerns of people? While we agree that the one basic and unchanging need of all people is the forgiveness of their sins and the building of their relationship with their God in Christ, the consequences of sin and alienation from God are multi-faceted and varied. The programs of ministry the church develops are based on assumptions about where sin and alienation have caused greatest hurt and need (e.g. parenting, substance abuse, loneliness). Certainly, sermon applications and classroom discussions are premised on such assumptions about our society. A philosophy of ministry incorporates such assumptions.

A church's philosophy of ministry is further shaped by its strengths and weaknesses. Because ours is a church body whose strength has historically been Christian education for the young, it would hardly be surprising that a congregation's philosophy of ministry prioritizes programs of educational ministry for children. It may be argued, I suppose, but not at the seminary, that biblical preaching is a strength of our church. Not surprisingly, then, a congregation's philosophy of ministry would stress getting people into church to hear the sermon as a primary means toward fulfilling its mission. "Sermonizing" would likely also, then, be a significant feature on the agenda of other church activities. (Some tension should be expected, therefore, if the congregation's philosophy of ministry and the pastor's personal strengths are not a match on this score.) A treasured strength of our church body is that the pastor is, above all, a "*Seelsorger*," one who cares for individuals with law and gospel. For that reason, the visitation and counseling ministry of the pastor will likely be a strength in most of our congregations. (Again, some tension can be expected in the pastor's ministry and in the congregation when the number of people requiring individual "pastoring" exceeds the ability of the pastor to meet needs.) Some congregations are extremely warm and caring. Most congregations will have a philosophy of ministry that consciously or subconsciously accentuates their strengths and minimizes the areas of ministry where they feel less competent or comfortable. And the strengths or weaknesses of a congregation are, for the most part, a composite of the strengths and weaknesses of its called workers and lay leaders.

For that reason, the philosophy of ministry of individuals—especially pastors and teachers—deserves some attention. Called workers influence the congregation with their philosophy of ministry. All the components of a congregation's philosophy of ministry will also shape an individual's philosophy of ministry, but there are several additional elements that color the way individuals view the church and its ministry.

Experience is one such element. The person whose experience with Christian ministry has included a variety of contexts (geographical, size and age of congregation, nature of ministry - mission, campus, administrative, institutional as well as established “traditional”) will likely have a different perspective than a person whose ministry or membership has been entirely in the same or a similar context. Personal experience, too, will have an impact on one’s philosophy of ministry. Travel, education, varied work experience, social interaction and reading all contribute to one’s understanding of the world in which we minister and the people to whom we minister. Our family experience is another conditioning agent. Married people tend to see things a bit differently than single people. Family values and traditions or the influence of a strong and respected family member (or pastor, friend, leader) can help to shape our philosophy of ministry. One or more dramatic or traumatic experiences in life will influence our view of life and ministry.

Our personalities, too, shape our approach to ministry. Some people are extremely optimistic and inclined to see primarily opportunities for ministry. Some are more cautious, even pessimistic, and tend to see more of the problems that confront ministry. One categorization of personalities, however limited, distinguishes four types of people. The radical’s greatest fear or concern is boredom. The progressive’s major concern is loss of opportunity. The conservative’s greatest concern is the loss of something dear or valued. The traditionalist fears change. Obviously, these different personalities will see situations of ministry from different mindsets. Another model of personality difference recognizes at least four intrinsic leadership styles. The “servant” style leads by example and seeks first to assist others in accomplishing ministry. The “dominant” leader is confident, forceful, directive and inclined to initiate change. The “planner” is more cautious, inclined to persuade others with carefully thought out reasoning, less likely to disturb the status quo. The “people-oriented” leader is more intent on relationships than tasks, relying on personal warmth and credibility to lead. There are other areas of personal difference, unique talents or strengths and spiritual gifts that help to account for the fact that people see issues of ministry from different perspectives, with different philosophies.

It might be interesting to discover that we differ also in our vision for the church. Asking people to describe in concrete terms what the ideal church would look like generally reveals that there are a variety of “outcome objectives” toward which people minister and, therefore, a variety of “agendas” for ministry. Because we seldom take time to spell out our own vision for the church, let alone try to understand someone else’s, we sometimes find ourselves in conflict over issues and decisions that face the church. Understanding what is and what comprises a philosophy of ministry may enable us to minimize such conflict and work together better.

To recap, a philosophy of ministry is the way we view and approach ministry because of our convictions, priorities, traditions, culture, heritage, assumptions, strengths, experiences, personalities and vision for the church. That philosophy of ministry will shape and explain *how* we do ministry *here* and *now*, and *why*.

In simple sequence, the following expresses the place of a philosophy of ministry in the church’s life:

1. THEOLOGY
2. MISSION
3. THEOLOGY OF MINISTRY
4. PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY
5. VISION
6. STRATEGY OF MINISTRY
7. MINISTRY

Steps one and seven are all-important. Steps two through six assure that our theology is put into practice as ministry in the most God-pleasing and effective way possible. Step two, mission, is the clarification

from Scripture of what God has called his Church to do. Step three, theology of ministry, is the distillation from Scripture of what the Church is and what ministry means. Step four, philosophy of ministry, is a biblical and contemporary view of *how* we will do ministry *here* and *now*. Step five, vision, is a long-range, articulated picture of what—under God—we want *our* church to be. Step six, strategy of ministry, is the planning process that—God willing—will take our church from where it is now to where we want it to be.

The Bible nowhere uses the expression “philosophy of ministry,” or for that matter “theology of ministry.” There are, however, examples in Scripture of all five steps between theology and ministry. Acts 6:1-7 is an example of the philosophy of ministry employed by the early church. An expanding workload made it necessary for the apostles to: 1) clarify priorities (“ministry of the Word of God and prayer”); 2) adapt structure to utilize the strengths/gifts God had given the church in its “laity.” Those verses also presage a conflict over tradition and culture that is resolved in Acts 15, where an accommodation by the Hebrew-Christian mother church of the Gentile mission churches establishes a distinction between *adiaphora* and the unquestioned will of God. Peter is something of a case study in Acts of a changing philosophy of ministry in this area.

The execution of Stephen was a dramatic, historical turning point in the early church’s philosophy of ministry. To that point public teaching in the temple and private fellowship in homes had been the approach to ministry. Now, with the dispersion of Christians created by persecution, the philosophy shifts toward personal witness by exiled Christians, gathering of small groups and confirmational instruction by circuit-riding apostles. Eventually, another “mother church” in Antioch is led to send missionaries by specific call (Paul and Barnabas) to the Gentile world.

Critical needs in the church developed programs to meet those needs. At least two major collections for impoverished Christians in Jerusalem are reported. The need to multiply ministry created both a protegee system or “peripatetic seminary” (cf. John Mark, Timothy, Titus) modeled after the experience of the disciples with Jesus (Mark 3:14) and the training-in-place of elders to shepherd newly created congregations in Asia Minor and elsewhere. The story of John Mark provides a window on how personality affects philosophy of ministry and how, in Paul’s case, God and experience mollify the impact of personality. The fact that Paul nearly everywhere supported himself with his tent-making skills—while maintaining the right of a called worker to be supported by those he serves—may reflect the assumptions of the apostle about a Greco-Roman society afflicted with religious “leeches.” At the Areopagus in Athens Paul demonstrates his assumptions about the people he hoped to win with the gospel.

It would, of course, be theologically hazardous to read back into Acts a nicely formulated philosophy of ministry. My point is only that, however unarticulated, the elements of a developing philosophy of ministry are identifiable. Every Christian or Christian Church operates with some philosophy of ministry, whether carefully thought out and developed or unwittingly accumulated over time.

Our primary concern ought to be that our philosophy of ministry is *biblical*. And the starting point for a biblical philosophy of ministry is objective justification. It is this truth that for the sake of Christ’s universal atonement God has declared all sinners acquitted which makes us evangelical. This truth changes our view of people, both the saved and the not-yet-saved, for as St. Paul says: “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view” (II Corinthians 5:16). This truth, not the Great Commission, is our basis for mission, our message and our motivation (II Corinthians 5:14), the scope of our ministry. This truth establishes my identity as a child of God and keeps me from treating my brothers and sisters in ministry as anything less than God’s dear children. Unless this truth is continually reaffirmed as the central element of our philosophy of ministry, we will bludgeon ourselves and others with “guilt and duty” reasons for ministry. We may even become petty legalists and dictators in a

confusion of law and gospel, with self-righteous pride a correlative curse. While loudly proclaiming that “only the Gospel motivates,” we may be found arm-twisting with psychology and pleading the Church’s need (of institutional self-preservation) (II Corinthians 4:2). While contending for our Christian liberty in conference essays, we may be canonizing traditions, preferences and opinions. A biblical philosophy of ministry is, above all, evangelical.

It is also essential that our philosophy of ministry be “scriptural,” rooted in the conviction that the Bible is not only verbally inspired and inerrant but also clear and sufficient, that it stands “magisterial” and authoritative over every principle of reason and the social sciences. It is this truth that keeps us from becoming God’s “lawyers” instead of God’s witnesses, as though clever argument could improve upon the power of the Word (I Corinthians 2:3-5; II Corinthians 10:3-5). It is this truth that frees us to encourage personal, family and small-group Bible study rather than insisting that only the pastor dare speak his interpretation and application of the Word or that the seminary or synod has some “*ex cathedra*” doctrinal authority. This truth inspires both boldness to teach an unpopular doctrine or admonish in an uncomfortable situation and the caution to bite one’s tongue when there is no clear Scriptural directive or promise. This truth, held in common, leads us to believe that we *can* resolve theological controversy in our midst, not hope it will go away. And this truth convinces us that we have something vital to say to our world, not just a sectarian dogmatics passed on through generations in a closed ecclesiastical society. A biblical philosophy of ministry is Scriptural (Keep reading II Timothy 3:15-17!).

The biblical doctrine of original sin is critical to our philosophy of ministry. It “keeps us honest” about the people to whom we minister if we will consistently apply what we teach. Why, then, do we marvel at how wicked and unbelieving society has become? It is the inevitable course of incorrigible human nature, especially when Christian light and salt withdraw into church buildings. We shouldn’t expect Christian interest, understanding or motivation (let alone any “decision” for Christ) from the people Christ sent us to evangelize. An “open door” philosophy of outreach that waits for the unchurched to “church” themselves is a theological contradiction. Worse yet, a “membership recruitment” philosophy that looks for “good people” to join our church is expecting the fruit of faith where the Bible says it can’t exist, because there is no spiritual life inherent in people. And why would we adopt the “one shot” evangelism strategy of those who expect “decisions,” when we understand the total depravity of the lost – a filter through which law and gospel witness must penetrate. Persistence in ministry is a philosophy born of the truth that human nature is irreconcilably blind, dead and hostile to God (I Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 2:1; Romans 8:7). And that human nature still resides, unwanted, in Christians (Romans 7). So we should scarcely be appalled at the sins and heartaches of church members, especially when their human nature is nurtured far more than their spiritual life. A counseling ministry of admonition, correction, comfort and encouragement can only be expected to grow until we adopt a philosophy of ministry that reflects our theology. Preventive ministry with the Word to the “new man,” an “immersion philosophy” rather than satisfaction with Sunday attendance, must become our approach. Daily drowning the Old Adam with God’s law and daily renewal of the New Man with the Gospel have to be more than a platitude. If that’s not happening, maybe it’s because that is not a serious dimension of our philosophy of ministry.

The Lutheran conviction that the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace, that the gospel is the “power of God for salvation” (Romans 1:16) and that the Spirit produces fruits of faith through the Word and Sacrament (Galatians 5:22), is yet another building block in a philosophy of ministry. Believing that, we won’t substitute programs for the Gospel, but we *will* generate every program possible to minister with the Gospel. We won’t substitute psychology and social science for the Gospel, but we *will* study those disciplines so that our approach to people does not become an obstacle to the Gospel’s being heard. We won’t, in frustration, resort to moralizing in the classroom because it’s a quick fix to discipline problems. We won’t make Jesus the “heavy” who “won’t like you if you don’t

behave.” We won’t “should” on people from the pulpit to vent our own frustrations at immorality in society and on our counseling calendar. We won’t preach law as “curb” when what people need is the law as “mirror.” And we won’t short-change the beautiful gospel that keeps people from despairing in their predicament and lifts them to lives of praise. If we believe that the Gospel works, our philosophy of ministry will be to find as many ways as possible to reach as many people as possible as many times as possible with that Gospel!

A biblical eschatology is important to our philosophy of ministry. We believe that heaven and hell are real, and that faith in Jesus is the one line of demarcation between those two destinies. We believe that Jesus’ return to judgement is imminent, with no “millennial events” intervening. Those convictions, consistently applied and combined with Christian compassion, will add urgency to our philosophy of ministry (John 9:4). There is a temptation, as we identify “last days” evidence in our world, to adopt a false eschatology that becomes “siege mentality.” Hopeless hand-wringing in the face of rapid moral and spiritual decline will paralyze the church in a posture of mere preservation (of saints and truth), when the last days warnings of Scripture are intended to spur us to greater mission. A defensive church (or Christian) is a “sitting duck” for Satan. It fears loss more than seeks gain. It robs Christians of joy and purpose, leaving especially the young it hopes to protect vulnerable to more “upbeat” religious groups. A reactionary church sits on its theological haunches pointing out error and immorality, but lacking an aggressive or proactive gospel ministry. A false eschatology will produce a law-orientation, if not legalism. In an affluent and hedonistic age, people long less for heaven. While a false eschatology of defeatism can turn us into “Millerites” sitting and waiting for return, a lacking eschatology will temporize faith and risk “Schullerism” – an “abundant life” worldliness. Our eternal inheritance is a most practical truth for focusing life properly and comforting life when its false props crumble. True eschatology helps to keep our mission of outreach clear and vital, free of social gospel, “liberation theology” and “functional universalism.” It will also assure that our mission of nurture remains focused and prioritized, rather than becoming mere “Christian pop psychology” for people’s problems.

A biblical philosophy of ministry is also clear on Christian life and sanctification. It addresses the Christian’s life as living out God’s will in joyful and loving response to his grace and for his glory. It provides purpose to Christian life, for we are “priests,” “ambassadors,” “light,” “friends” (John 15:15-17), “mutual ministers” (I Peter 2:9-12). It focuses Jesus’ “new commandment” of love (John 13:34-35). It promises spiritual gifts and graces (Romans 12). It urges growth in character (II Peter 1:5-8) knowledge and ability to serve (Ephesians 4:11-16). It defines the *discipleship* which Jesus commissioned, the *stewardship* which Scripture urges and the *renewal* (Romans 6; Psalm 51; Romans 12:1-2) that is our whole life. Without clear, fervent teaching of the Christian life, people will be “all dressed up (in Christ’s righteousness) with nowhere to go.” The most mature members will become frustrated for lack of direction and opportunity to serve. The weaker members will become comfortably complacent. Mediocrity in ministry will become the substitute for excellence befitting our God. With St. Paul we need the mindset of “pressing on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Philippians 3:12). There should be an excitement about Christian life and mission, not a sedentary boredom which has the audacity to say, “I heard all that already.” It will not happen right if we allow sanctification to replace justification as the cornerstone of our theology and philosophy of ministry. But it is a blighted harvest we present our Lord if we ignore the beautiful truths of Scripture regarding Christian life. And be reminded that it is not mere third use of the law Scripture offers on Christian life. Countless promises of God, rooted in and validated by the central promise of salvation, give Christian life the strength, joy, hope, peace, confidence and more that comfort in trials, surmount problems and elevate life to an adventure with the Savior. A biblical philosophy of ministry takes Christian life seriously.

Though many other biblical doctrines shape our philosophy of ministry, let me elaborate one more that is essential – the doctrine of church and ministry. The truth that there is a Holy Christian Church, however invisible to human eyes and polity, keeps us from becoming arrogant about the orthodoxy God’s grace has preserved for us or sectarian in our testimony to that sound doctrine. We have not been called to mere separatism, for fear that contact with the heterodox will contaminate us. Truth has been given us to share, also with the erring. The truth that among visible churches there are orthodox and heterodox, with Scripture’s injunction to “mark and avoid” (Romans 16:17), keeps us from unionism that would compromise sound doctrine. We have not been called to build Christ’s Church by theologically incompatible amalgamation. Christ builds His Church (Matthew 16:18). The truth that visible churches can be more than a geographically local entity keeps us from parochialism. It is a false philosophy of ministry that seeks to build a congregational “empire” to the neglect of the wider “kingdom.” True ecumenism makes a synodical fellowship vitally interested in and supportive of the work we do with and for one another in the Wisconsin Synod. In an age of waning denominational loyalties, we need to build positive ties with one another. The consequences of failing to do so will be doctrinal degeneration, “partly spirit” polarization, crippled mission work, unnecessary duplication of effort and the loss of our members who move to heterodox churches or inactive isolation. For that matter, it is not enough to stand firm against false fellowship if we ignore the nurturing of genuine Christian fellowship within our congregations. Scripture’s analogy of the Body of Christ compels us to approach ministry with the conviction that members serve one another with the Spirit’s complementary gifts. That mutual ministry of love, prayer, teaching, counseling, comforting, admonishing, burden-bearing, forgiving, sharing and rejoicing which characterized the early church (Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35) and is urged in the epistles (e.g. Colossians 3:12-17; I Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 4) must be the “vision” or ideal we hold before our churches and work toward.

The Body of Christ analogy suggests also that we reaffirm our Reformation heritage of the universal priesthood of believers (I Peter 2:9). Christians need to be reminded that their whole life is ministry. If we have a passive membership, it may be that we have unwittingly fostered that by a philosophy of ministry which vests the doing of ministry in “called workers” while diminishing lay ministry to sitting at meetings and voting approval or disapproval of what “hired” ministers can do. If an atmosphere of tension or apathy exists, it status quo is the norm (status quo is the one thing a church doesn’t vote on), it may be because the laity are not involved in *doing* ministry. Our philosophy of ministry is wrong if we are not seeking to utilize the gifts God has given all his people in service to Him, if we aren’t recruiting and training lay ministers while developing roles in which they can effectively serve (Ephesians 4:11-13). The New Testament model for ministry is flexibility in form, inflexibility in function or purpose. Can we better utilize that freedom to form ministry according to God’s purpose and our current needs and opportunities, rather than merely perpetuate forms we’ve inherited? (The Bible, it seems to me, distinguishes the universal priesthood or personal ministry from what may be termed “called” lay ministry functioning in the name of the church and the specific offices of “full time” or “shared time” ministry that we have basically reduced to “pastor” and “teacher” in the congregation.

Perhaps we need to reassert also that the essence of ministry is *servicing* (cf. II Corinthians 2:17 and 4:5), with Jesus as our model (Philippians 2:5), and the measure of ministry is *faithfulness* (I Corinthians 4:2). The world’s inverted pecking order, its “perks” and its inflated standard of living can turn ministry into a profession rather than a vocation. Increasing expectations and criticism of pastors and teachers only further this “job mentality,” with burnout (assuming you accept the term) more the product of discontent and lacking satisfaction and significance in the work than of over-work. Serving Christ and his people is satisfaction enough; but that truth needs continued reiteration and human “vessels” of ministry need the continuing support of those they serve (Hebrews 13:17-18). Again, mutual ministry, owned and shared by all who’ve confessed Christ as Savior and Lord to become a congregation, should lie at the heart of our philosophy of ministry. No more can be asked of us than that

we carry out ministry as the pastoral epistles establish that ministry. Theological faithfulness—“rightly dividing the Word of Truth,” “proclaiming it in season and out of season” and further such injunctions—is one aspect. But it is ministerial excuse-making to cloak indolence and “passionless pastoring” in orthodoxy and call this faithfulness. Faithfulness involves also whole hearted commitment, compassion, stewardship of gifts and time and exemplary leadership. Each of us, pastors, teachers and lay leaders should measure our own ministries so that we are not found “building straw” on the foundation Christ is and laid for his Church (I Corinthians 3:10-15). Our personal philosophy of ministry must be rooted in committed service and faithfulness.

Our philosophy of ministry should also be contemporary. Before defining what that means, it may be necessary to state what that does not mean. It does not mean chasing the winds of change in order to be “chic,” popular or “with it.” It does not mean endorsing social trends and life-styles. It does not mean substituting psychology, sociology and anthropology for theology. It does not mean jumping onto passing bandwagons offering ecclesiastical panaceas, as though “movements” or programs were simple solutions to what ails the church. It does not mean compromising what Scripture says or what the church is.

“Contemporary” does mean that we care about the society and community to which God has sent us in mission and about our members who are living—all too often—with more than just one foot in that society. We care enough to study and understand our world, both to critically evaluate where and how it is condemning itself in error and immorality and to analyze how we can best approach people with law and gospel, as we seek to win lost souls and equip God’s people for the struggle of life in this world. Contemporary does mean that we want our church to be relevant. The Word of God is timelessly relevant, but the church’s structure, programs and methods of ministry (based on its philosophy of ministry) may not be apropos, applicable, germane, pertinent—that is relevant—to the people it hopes to serve. If the way we do ministry places obstacles between the Word of God and people who need to hear it, we aren’t relevant. We can be insensitive, archaic or indifferent and, therefore, fail to touch hearts and lives with our ministry. Only the Amish can make a virtue out of irrelevance.

There is more than theology in our ministry. Our teaching methodology is based on principles borrowed from the secular world. Our homiletics didn’t originate with the apostles. Our congregational structure looks suspiciously like that of non-religious organizations. When we canvass or make follow-up calls, when we counsel, when we prepare the church bulletin ... we are employing principles from the social sciences, from psychology or education, sociology or communications theory. God has not prescribed these “how to” issues. We need to appreciate that a methodological history or tradition is not prescriptive. Our primary concern is that the principles and methods we employ are compatible with and subservient to the message we’ve been sent to proclaim. Our secondary concern is that these principles and methods are effective, that they best serve and least impede the purpose for which we’ve been sent. Hence, “contemporary,” what best serves the message and purpose of the church here and now.

It is not my intention to prescribe the contemporary dimension of your philosophy of ministry. To do so would contradict the Christian liberty you enjoy as well as my premise that your situation, strengths, personality and vision are integral—though not dominant—elements of *your* philosophy of ministry. I intend rather to raise questions and focus issues significant to the contemporary society to which we minister.

The religious and spiritual climate of our country serves as a backdrop to our philosophy of ministry *assumptions*. A mixed blessing of life in this “communications age” is that there are mountains of research data available, whose interpretation we must ultimately make for ourselves. Conservative churches are growing; mainline, liberal churches are declining. Draw an encouraging conclusion. Nondenominational and Pentecostal churches are rapidly growing. Anti-institutional attitudes, subjectivism and individualism are probably reflected in this; but there may be lessons for us to reflect

on. People are interested in Bible study (the number of people attending adult Bible classes in the WELS has increased 34% over the past decade). People want a personal relationship with God, not merely a corporate religious identity. They want spiritual relationships and significance to their membership (meaningful roles) beyond a Sunday service. Recently, it has been large churches that attract people, apparently because of the program choices and staff ministries available in the large church. Polls show confidence in the clergy plummeting, yet a recent study by the (former) ALC listed “the pastor as person” (not his gifts) number one among reasons why people are attracted to and stay with a church. Pastoral visitation is listed among the primary components of an “effective” church in another study. Studies among the unchurched repeatedly arrive at a “top three” attractions: relevant sermons, warm and friendly people and a nursery for the children. The “feminization” of the church is reflected in a change from near-equal male-female church attendance in 1952 to an estimated 60:40 ratio of women to men of late. The waning of denominational loyalty is demonstrated by a study showing that nearly 50% of the “Protestants” who move will not join a church of the same denomination as their former church. And there are reportedly 5 million unaffiliated Lutherans who’ve moved, most of them to the southwestern edge of the country.

Of what value generalizations are to your situation, you must judge. Certainly, none of us will revise his ministry based simply on national statistics. And there aren’t a lot of WELS statistics. Certainly also, none of us measures “success” (whatever that term means) in the church by a body count. And our theology and core values can’t be a “price to pay” for numerical growth. It would be hazardous, however, to assume that WELS members are widely different from other Christians in this communications age. And it may be plain hard-headed not to reflect on what such trends may suggest to our programs and approaches for ministry. For example, why are groups in our churches organized around gender (Ladies Aid) and age (Pioneers, Youth Group, Ladies Aid)? If these groups aren’t achieving their purpose (or can’t recall their purpose), a study of trends may help us redirect the group life of our church. Declining involvement in the church by men may be a reflection of the fact that we lack meaningful groups for men and the roles for men in the church are primarily verbal, a skill not male-endemic according to one study. When studies suggest people prize “relational” approaches, the pastor may well reevaluate the ratio of time spent in his office and time spent in visitation. Face-to-face fellowship opportunities and peer ministry may become items on the planning board. Of course, analyzing national trends has little value until we’ve done self-study to understand our strengths, weaknesses and patterns in ministry as well as opportunities and barriers to ministry internally and in our community.

The spiritual climate in our nation has not reversed a three-decade slide in the percentage of people who are churched. Yet polls indicate that the majority of people see themselves as religious; and some polls are startling in the degree of religious conviction that unchurched people have. Of late, young people have become more religious but less moral, according to polls. In fact, there is little difference in moral values between churched and unchurched Americans in a recent study. Americans are virtually Bible-illiterate, for the most part; but a majority still hold the Bible in high regard and wish they were more familiar with it. As humanism spreads its tentacles throughout American life, evidence suggests that egoism, living for “now,” materialism and other trends of secularization will continue to erode confidence and interest in the Bible and its message, especially among the well-educated. It appears that the “New Age Movement” may be coalescing the previous decade’s eastern cults, occult interest and humanistic world-view to become a counter-culture “religion” to be reckoned with. On the brighter side, a *USA TODAY* study showed well over half the young couples with children reconsidering “church.” Again, one can draw, but not prove, conclusions. At least one conclusion is that people are intellectualizing faith and dichotomizing life, maybe in our churches as elsewhere. The result is a religion of convenience rather than real conviction. What does that mean to the emphasis in our ministry, the structure of our ministry, the expectations and “outcome objectives” of our ministry?

Another conclusion may be that churches like ours, with a historically strong program of Christian education for children, have people already interested in us – however inadequate or wrong their reasons. I fear that the future will make evangelism more difficult because basic assumptions about the existence and nature of God, life after death, sin and the Bible will no longer be a part of many people's thinking. What assumptions about the unchurched and their understanding of spiritual basics do we make now? And how do these affect our outreach strategy and evangelism approach? To be sure, evangelism is still the same law-gospel truth. The question is how to gain an audience for that truth.

A great deal of research into churches has produced books and seminars on the small church, the middle-sized church and the large church, as well as subdivisions of those categories. Other studies categorize the church with different models, based on theology or tradition or polity or whatever. It's hard to avoid the researcher /analyst's theological bias or the pure pragmatism of sociology in such studies. Authors themselves avoid making universals and truisms out of generalizations. Still, there is practical value in this research when we discover that "breaking the 200 barrier," for example, is a problem for our church too. Issues such as staffing, organizational structure, leadership style and program development face our churches. And what others have uncovered may give us another viewpoint on our situation. Subjects such as assimilation of members, church planning, conflict management and more have been explored from a variety of viewpoints. The results can assist us in understanding and addressing the issues, however unique may be our situation and however different our theology.

Another area of assumptions which shapes our philosophy of ministry has to do with how people learn. Contemporary society is increasingly visual rather than verbal. Society is becoming less literate. The welter of information bombarding us has made people more selective listeners, less reflective thinkers. The law of entropy in the natural sciences seems to have a parallel in the social sciences; people are less logical, less organized, more random thinkers. Two decades ago I was informed that the "learning curve" increased through four educational methods; from what we hear, to what we see, to what we say, and at the peak, what we do. More recently I've read studies in early childhood education that suggest three modes of learning: auditory, visual, and kinesthetic, with most children learning best in one of those modes. I didn't even understand the most recent categorization of learning modes I read. Attention spans have apparently diminished. Memorization skills, like reading and writing skills, have declined.

If all of the above are accepted, it seems likely that the educational philosophy of a generation or more ago may not be as effectively employed today. In exploring why the church placed nearly all of its educational emphasis on children, Pastor Ronald Heins discovered that educational theory in the early 20th century assumed that the ability to learn diminished rapidly after one's early twenties. That theory is no longer held; but the church still invests nearly all of its Christian education resources and energy in children. How much of what they learned as children do they retain in middle age? How capable are people of applying what they learned as children to what they face as adults? Are cognitive educational approaches accomplishing our purpose with adolescents enduring an affective pre-occupation? What changes may be necessary in Christian education for children who are receiving far less (if any) reinforcement in the home than was the case a generation ago? At least one congregation's study of why adult members weren't coming to Bible class revealed such practical barriers as habit and tradition, embarrassment at ignorance and fear of being asked to speak or read. Other studies suggest that while some members want small-group, interactive Bible study, others prefer the anonymity of a large class taught lecture-style. Most members profess not to know how to study the Bible on their own or how to witness what they've learned.

All of this suggests a conscious re-evaluation and prioritization of our objectives in Christian education, our structure of Christian education and our methods of Christian education. Is a curriculum for adults, "graded" to levels of spiritual knowledge and maturity, an idea whose time has come? Should

we not consider multiple options for adult Bible study, recognizing that this will mean lay-led Bible classes? And can't we harness the audio and video technology of our age to enhance educational options? Are concentrated opportunities for spiritual growth like retreats and seminars more effective than weekly schedules for some people? How do we assist dad to be the spiritual head of his house, and how can we help the family without a father to be a "Christian school?" We still claim that the primary responsibility for Christian education rests with the home; but we've done little to compensate for the fact that this responsibility is fumbled repeatedly. What does it suggest when significant numbers of adults claim to have gotten more out of the "children's sermon"—where this addition to Sunday worship has been installed—than out of the regular sermon? Dare we ask whether our traditional philosophy and style of homiletics communicates the Word as clearly and effectively today as it did a generation ago? A contemporary philosophy of ministry addresses these questions and more when Christian education lies at the heart of our ministry. We cannot let "means" become "ends."

Assumptions about our society and relationships within society color our philosophy of ministry because the church is relational, a "family" of God. The church may even replace "family" in the traditional sense for some people when social trends are analyzed. "Urbanization" is one such trend. And as people move to the city, several other phenomena seem to occur. "Privatization" means that people have fewer friends, few if any close friends. In the absence of extended family, people need "place" and "belonging." The church can recognize and fill that void, or watch people commit themselves elsewhere. The city has had a marked influence on the "secularization" of life, as described earlier, in large part because of "pluralization." Pluralization exposes people to an amalgam of cultures, values and life-styles, challenging their world view and forcing discrimination on them. Not everyone has values or criteria to discriminate. Pluralization has produced a society of "choices." Marketing has emphasized consumer choices and individuality. Television has spread the message well beyond urban environs. As a result, people come to church less homogeneous in their attitudes, convictions and values; and they look to the church to offer them the options or choices they've come to expect times of worship, types of Bible study and service roles, nature of fellowship groups and activities. Perhaps the challenge to preserve unity with diversity is not new to the church. The early church faced the challenge and forged a beautiful fellowship. Traditional structures and group dynamics in the church of today may need adjusting; and that early church can be the model we study first.

Demographic studies have proliferated to the point of nauseating rather than alarming us any more. But rapid changes in the social fabric of our country are alarming. Consider this potpourri of news, most of it bad. While the divorce rate may be plateauing, it has devastated traditional concepts of family; and the impact within the church may still be accelerating. There are 2.25 million couples living together out of wedlock, a number growing by 100,000 per year. Illegitimate births increased by 24% from 1980 to 1985, pushing thousands of children into poverty conditions. More than half the government's category of poor families are headed by a single mother. More than a quarter of America's children live in single-parent homes. Projections are that at least one in every ten teenagers will contract a sexually transmitted disease. The number whose lives are touched by alcoholism and drug abuse is higher.

Society's remedies are discouraging. Sex-education and birth control for children ... day care for toddlers and dawn-to-dusk programs in public schools ... gay rights ... abortion on demand ... an occasional shelter for street people and support groups proliferating with each new abuse people manage to inflict on themselves, each other and children.

No church is going to right these wrongs and solve these problems with its own version of "programs." Ours are not the weapons of the world (II Corinthians 10:4). Changing hearts one-by-one with the Gospel will change lives and, only that way, society. But the church must minister to the family that is, not the family that should be. A philosophy of ministry based on the assumption of '50's nuclear families won't address Scripture to the people who need to hear it, the way they need to hear it. I think

the time is past when our major concern ought to be avoiding the impression of endorsing broken homes, “latchkey” kids and day care. It is time to minister to reality, however sad. We can turn problems into opportunities. That means more direct and deliberate ministry to families, both preventive/nurturing and remedial/up-building. It may mean Christian child care, “mother’s day out” or “parents night out” baby-sitting, parenting classes, support groups. And the efforts we give at both demonstrating and teaching Christ’s love will be a tool of outreach to people outside our midst as well. It means that we will carefully and clearly address God’s Word to the social sins of our day, for our silence will be misconstrued. But we will be careful not to bludgeon the victims of sin with mere moralizing or leave the impression that sinners are beyond the reach of God’s grace.

There are other social phenomena that impact the church’s life and ministry. The trend toward later marriage and smaller families, especially among professional people, is one. The increasing number of single people, especially single women, means that our “traditional family” approach to ministry (and our resulting communication) must adjust to accommodate singles in the life and work of the church. The “graying” of America presents the church with a potential pool of lay workers largely untapped, as well as with counseling issues just beginning to unfold. Whether the church forms new groups to assimilate people who were once atypical or creates effective fellowship “bridges” to “family” people of diverse stations in life will be the decision of each congregation, within its philosophy of ministry - both nurture and outreach. But to ignore these social trends is to base a philosophy of ministry on false assumptions.

The subject has not been exhausted; no doubt, the audience has. We may differ in our perspective on the contemporary but, pray God, not the biblical dimension of our philosophy of ministry. We will bring to the subject a personal outlook that is not fixed. We must minister in a context that has unique features. We may adopt priorities for our “here and now” without undermining the unchanging mission of the Church. We will not all have the precise, same philosophy, whether we’ve thoughtfully articulated one or not. This essay is an encouragement to such thought, if not articulation, but especially to biblical and contemporary ministry.