

# **A Time to Heal: Ministering to a Congregation after a Pastoral Resignation or Termination**

*Rev. Geoffrey A. Kieta*

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King Solomon wrote:

There is a time for everything,  
and a season for every activity under heaven:  
<sup>2</sup> a time to be born and a time to die,  
a time to plant and a time to uproot,  
<sup>3</sup> a time to kill and a time to heal,  
a time to tear down and a time to build,  
<sup>4</sup> a time to weep and a time to laugh,  
a time to mourn and a time to dance,  
<sup>5</sup> a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,  
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,  
<sup>6</sup> a time to search and a time to give up,  
a time to keep and a time to throw away,  
<sup>7</sup> a time to tear and a time to mend,  
a time to be silent and a time to speak,  
<sup>8</sup> a time to love and a time to hate,  
a time for war and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8).

It would be a misunderstanding of this passage to take it as meaning, "Hey, everything's going to happen at some time." King Solomon is speaking of God's governance of the Christian's life "under the sun." He calls us to recognize that our times are in God's hands – times of hurt and times of healing. True wisdom trusts that he knows what he is doing when he sends times of hurt and sorrow into our lives.

Most of the things that the Holy Spirit led Solomon to say about us as individual Christians under the sun also apply to our lives together in our congregations for the simple reason that they, too, exist "under the sun." They have to struggle with all the effects of life in a sinful world. When bad times come, they have to learn to trust the Lord who doesn't always reveal what he is doing or why. One of the most painful experiences for a congregation is the resignation of their pastor or worse, the termination of his call, especially if either is for cause. Since any of us could find ourselves deliberating a call to a congregation reeling from that experience, we want to consider the unique challenges that a pastoral resignation or termination presents to caring for the souls of God's people who remain after that pastor leaves.

You might wonder what qualifies me to speak to this question in more than a theoretical sense. You have every right to ask. I would point to the years that I have

served on the District Help Team. That has made me privy to many situations in our district that involved the ending of ministries for both pastors and teachers. While my focus has been on ministering to the called worker, in real life, the situation in the congregation can never be far from your mind. More to the point is my own ministry history. In the call I served before I came to Livonia, the congregation had had four pastors in ten years. Two (including my immediate predecessor) had resigned for cause and a third was forced to retire (very much against his wishes) for health reasons. During that same decade, they closed their school. Most of you are probably aware of the fact that my immediate predecessor in my current call also resigned for cause. So while I am not an expert on the topic, I do have some practical experience with the issue.

## **Understanding the Way Christians Respond to Resignations and Terminations**

Pastors leave the ministry for a variety of reasons. They can range from relatively easy to understand things like medical reasons to more complicated issues that lead to resigning or being terminated for the good of the ministry or for cause. Each situation is unique. The amount of hurt and confusion you will encounter varies. One variable is how long the man served in that congregation. If he was there for many years, chances are the congregation will struggle more with his leaving. If he was only there a short time, they may have a relatively minor set of issues to work through. But time isn't the only factor. His character and his faithfulness as he went about his ministry will greatly impact how troubled they are by his loss. If the congregation loved him deeply and clearly saw the blessings of gospel ministry under his care, the loss will be harder. Another major set of variables is the circumstances of the resignation or termination itself. When a pastor retires, those who benefited from his ministry are often sad to see him go. Yet, generally, they are happy for him and hope he will enjoy his "golden years." But if he leaves for other reasons, the situation is quite different. If they find those reasons to be very troubling, or if they feel that it was badly handled, that will affect their response.

While each situation is unique, we can make some general observations because of the way that God has designed us human beings. The Lutheran understanding of anthropology notes that in addition to the standard dichotomy of soul and body, God designed man to consist of intellect, emotion and will. Our faith is a part of all three. It affects the way we think, the way we feel and what we do. Conversely, our faith is affected by what we do, by what we feel and by what we think. It's a two-way street. How our people feel about what has happened, what they think about what has happened and how they act in response to what has happened are all issues the new pastor has to face. In all their responses, we will see again and again that every Christian is a sinner and a saint at the same time. The circumstances surrounding the resignation or termination of their pastor's call will affect the ongoing war between the old man and the new man in their hearts.

Of course, when we apply this to a congregation, we are talking about a collection of individuals. Each one has his own combination of emotional responses and his own level of intellectual knowledge about what has happened. But they are also a community of believers and each individual's responses affect the thinking, the feeling and the

actions of others within that community of believers – but not in a uniform way. So your task as the pastor is to deal corporately with the entire congregation and individually with members. Not an easy task – but God never promised ministry would be easy.

### *Emotional Responses*

Emotion is often far more powerful in terms of affecting will than intellect is. Quite often, a person does and even thinks something because of their emotional response to it. In fact, human beings often manufacture rationales to explain the things that their feelings drove them to do. If I'm honest, I have to admit that I do that. Don't you?

God's people in the congregations we serve do, too. So we need to understand their feelings about a resignation or termination in order to minister to them. The most obvious reaction is simply hurt. The way God designed congregations, members love their pastors. When God sends us to comfort the hurting, to encourage those who are downhearted, to proclaim his love, to teach them about Jesus and to point them in the way God would have them live, he does a miracle that we can only call grace: he moves those members to love us. They don't always do a good job of showing it, but that love is there. And when a pastor has to resign or has his call terminated, that just hurts.

It's not much different from a funeral. The members feel a loss because this was the man they looked to for all those gospel blessings. Without indulging in a rehash of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief, we do need to recognize that God's people have a legitimate need to grieve the loss of their shepherd. Some of them are going to be angry. Some might be in denial. Some might even want to engage in some kind of bargaining with the synod to bring their beloved pastor back.

Obviously, those very active members who rub shoulders with their pastor almost every day and who really get to know him and his wife and children often develop a very personal relationship with them and affection for them. For those members, the hurt may be very fresh and sharp. Others may never have been that close. But they came Sunday after Sunday and they heard him. They wanted to be shepherded and they were. They or their children were confirmed or baptized or married by him. These are deeply emotional moments for people and that pastor had a part in those moments. They may even be surprised themselves by how much hurt they feel at the loss of this man.

Unfortunately, hurt often gives way to anger. You've all seen it. Often, it's an unreasoning response to a difficult situation. But in this kind of situation, it is often compounded by time. Those hurt people brood over what happened and they begin to warp the situation in their minds. They start out by speculating, "I'll bet this happened." By the time you talk to them, that speculation has hardened in their minds into incontrovertible fact. Nothing you can say will change their belief or recall the conveniently forgotten information that contradicts their assumption. So they become angry at the synod or the district, the circuit pastor or the district president for forcing their pastor out. They become angry at that clique in the congregation that fired him. They become angry at you because you are there to replace him.

Some members will be angry at their former pastor. Or they may experience a deep disappointment in him. The way God set up the ministry, God's people not only love their pastors, they look up to them. God says that those who preach the Word are worthy of double honor (1 Timothy 5:17). At the same time, God does call pastors and teachers to be blameless (Titus 1:6-7) – to not be guilty of public sin because it brings

disrepute on the ministry. Sadly, the inherent legalism of the human heart causes some people to put their pastors on a pedestal. (How many times have your members asked you to pray for them and made it clear that they think your prayers are better because you're closer to God?) The pedestal is a sinful exaggeration of the honor God calls his people to render those who care for their souls.

But God did establish the honor. When a pastor does not live up to that honor, he crushes his members. The Old Adam begins to whisper in their ears. Some may become judgmental and condemn all pastors as hypocrites. Some may become despondent and stop coming to church. The situation is dramatically harder if the pastor hurt a member's family on the way out. Especially if the resignation or termination is for cause, it's possible that the pastor is guilty of some terrible offense, which is only magnified by the fact that he was a servant of the Word when he did it. You may have a great deal of work to do to earn back that family's trust. Fair or not, you are going to pay for what your predecessor did.

One particularly difficult response that the new pastor faces is discouragement. Any time a congregation has a vacancy, it can feel like their program has ground to a halt. When a pastor resigns or is terminated, that feeling usually is more intense. Quite often, the time before the resignation was already difficult because whatever issue ended the previous pastor's ministry was already taking a toll on the congregation. Especially if it adversely affected his preaching – through false doctrine or unfaithful preparation – the membership can begin to feel like the congregation is hopeless. Defeatism can set in. Even when you challenge them to trust in God's promise of working through the Means of Grace, they may in the same breath affirm their faith in that promise and still express their conviction that nothing the congregation tries is going to work. This "gloom and doom" outlook can be one of the longest lasting emotional effects because it doesn't have to be passionate, like anger or disappointment. It can simply fester "under the radar" and rear its ugly head every time you try to lead them in any direction.

### *Intellectual Responses*

You and I spend all day in the Word of God. God's people rarely have that opportunity, so sometimes, very specific truths of Scripture are lost upon them. What God says about the qualifications for the ministry are hard for some lay people to grasp. They just don't spend that much time in the pastoral epistles, so they may not even remember what God says the qualifications are. They may not have memorized "Pastors" from the table of duties. Too often, they think in terms of personal experience and affection, so they don't understand why we just can't put whatever it was behind us.

Many times, members confuse forgiveness with forgetting about the past. They don't understand that a person can be forgiven and yet no longer be eligible to serve in the ministry (even we pastors struggle with that sometimes). So they may ask, "Why don't we just forgive him?" and they mean, "Why don't we give him his job back?" You will have to carefully and patiently explain this point. Fortunately, in the calls I served, the men who resigned wrote good letters in which they confessed their sins to the congregation and expressed the fact that they were no longer eligible to serve in the public ministry. Even with that being said, there were members who just couldn't – or wouldn't – wrap their minds around that truth.

The situation is even worse when the membership does not know what happened. They never know everything that happened. You do not know everything that happened, even if the circuit pastor gave you a thorough run down on the situation. Only God knows all that happened. But sometimes, the pastor who left does not make it clear that what he did was wrong or that his actions disqualify him from the ministry. The 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment means that even what you do know, you can't always share. So it can be very hard to explain to people that their former pastor cannot serve anymore, even if he is forgiven, without crossing the line into gossip.

Another kind of theological confusion that could come up deals with the actual ministry of the person who has left. There may be questions about the validity of the baptism he performed for a member's child. There may be questions about the sermons he preached and the weddings and even funerals he officiated at. Some of these questions may be more emotional responses – "I can't believe that man buried my wife!" But in the end, the issue is the validity of the gospel when it comes from someone who had to leave the ministry, especially for cause. In truth, this is probably less common than the other questions that we face in this area, but that may only be because people don't think of ministry enough in terms of administering the Means of Grace. The more they think in terms of rituals and customs and personal relationships, the more confused they will be about this. But paradoxically, the less they may think about whether the gospel was valid in the hands of someone who ultimately could not continue in the ministry.

In addition to the theological confusion about what God says and what repentance and forgiveness mean in this situation, there is another area of confusion that can present even greater challenges: people don't know how the synod works. They don't understand terms like "for cause" or "for the good of the ministry." They don't understand who the circuit pastor or the district president is. Is he your boss? Your first-line supervisor? Your lawyer? Especially if the circuit pastor or district president had to come in and more or less compel the pastor to resign or strongly encourage the congregation to terminate his call, or, by praesidium action, suspend his membership in the synod, some members may experience a great deal of confusion over who this guy is to butt into their congregation. You may find that the concept of calling men to supervise doctrine and practice is totally foreign to some long-time members. They may not even see how it applies in a situation in which it seems perfectly obvious to you.

### *Voluntary Responses*

Unfortunately, the devil uses all this to get into the fabric of the congregation's life. Every question begins to divide people. Quite often, the disruption in their ministry leads to a congregation that looks a lot like the one St. Paul served in Corinth. Factions and jealousy can result. From that comes blaming. People who were big supporters of the former pastor blame those people who kept undercutting him. People who were disenchanted with the former pastor blame those people who refused to see anything bad about him.

This can lead the congregation into some surprising discussions. Sometimes people who have been unhappy for a long time will assert themselves in the wake of the crisis. They may believe that whatever happened somehow proves they have been right all along. They may begin to push actions that they have wanted to see for a long time.

At the same time, some members who used to be very involved may withdraw. They may still come to church, but they refuse to serve in any way. They tell you that they're tired of the politics or they just can't take it anymore. Offerings drop off and the ensuing financial crisis only increases everybody's stress. Sadly, you may have to accept the fact that you are going to lose members over these situations. It is almost always true. Sometimes, it's worse than at other times.

But there is another side to this: purification. You're all familiar with the ancient saying that God uses persecution to purify the Church. Well he uses hardship that way, too. As I mentioned before, my previous congregation went through the ringer on this issue three times in the ten years before I served there. It was hard. When I looked at the attendance statistics, during the nine years I was there, they never got above 75 or 80% of what they were before all that happened.

But you know what? I don't think I will ever serve a congregation that did a better job of making me feel loved and appreciated. Early on, I realized that everyone who was going to leave had left. Those who stayed were not there because they liked a particular pastor. They were there for the gospel. When they got a new pastor who preached the good news about Jesus, they were still prepared – after all that hurt and disappointment – to love him. To love me and my family.

God designed us human beings to have a complex interaction of intellect, emotion and will. In each of these areas, we are sinners and saints at the same time. Our reactions in each of these areas affect our faith. God called you and me to serve his people because we sinners are so good at damaging our faith by the way we think, the way we feel and the way we act.

But the good news is that God has given us the tools to treat damaged faith. And by a miracle of his grace, when faith grows, it changes us. It changes how we think. It changes how we feel. It changes how we act. Your ministry to a congregation that has experienced the resignation or termination of its pastor is designed to build up their faith. Trust the Holy Spirit to make changes in all those areas as a fruit of faith.

## **Strategies for Ministering to Individual Christians**

The vast majority of our ministry is done in public. We reach more people in a sermon than we possibly can with individual contacts during the week. But we must be prepared for the kind of individualized ministry that a resignation or a termination necessitates.

As we talk about ministering to the emotional, intellectual and voluntary needs and responses of members, we will see that the line between them is hazy. Each Christian experiences his life as a whole individual, not as two parts (sinner and saint) fighting for control of a machine or three distinct facets (intellect, emotion and will) that each take turns operating that machine. But it is useful to recognize that the responses we face come from different areas of a person's make-up and a person may be very emotional or thinking very deeply or very focused on action at any given moment. These individualized responses are much easier to see and address in private ministry than they are in public ministry situations.

### *Ministering to the Emotional Responses*

Sometimes when people share their feelings with us, we men who are trained to talk fall into the trap of arguing with what these people are saying. In effect, we're arguing with what they feel. That rarely does any good. Their feelings are real. To deal with their feelings (and perhaps the way you feel about their feelings), you need to realize three things:

1. You are not your predecessor. Don't try to take his place in their heart. Let the preaching of the gospel make your own place in their heart.
2. Don't jump in with all your counseling expertise. You have that expertise. But listen first. Let them tell their story and get their feelings out so you know what you're ministering to. Don't assume you know where they need to hear the law or the gospel until they've told you how they feel and what they've experienced.
3. When it is your turn to talk, remember that Isaiah pictures Christ as gathering his lambs in his arms and gently carrying them (Isaiah 40:11). Isaiah also says that a bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not snuff out (Isaiah 42:3). He's talking about Christ ministering to the crises of faith that his people experience. Imitate him and be gentle. Tell those hurt Christians that what happened to their pastor was a tragedy for everyone. Now, don't treat sin like it's just a big mistake. But even when sin is willful and destructive, it is still a tragedy that the devil wins. It's a tragedy that God's people are suffering – and it's our job to empathize with the hurt before we launch into an explanation and defense of what St. Paul says about the qualifications for ministry.

Knowing those three things, you are prepared to offer God's comfort: he loves the pastor who left and even forgives his sins. He does all things for the good of his Church, including this congregation that you both belong to now and he will even use this situation for your collective good. He will give you the strength you need to move on. But be careful here! Don't make it sound like this hurting member sure is lucky to have you there to pick up the pieces.

Recognize that in this life, we can't always see what God is doing. Most of us can't weigh the good and the bad that we've experienced and show that the "good" experiences always outweigh the bad. Sometimes it seems like there's a whole lot more bad than good in our lives! So don't point them to experience to prove that God loves them. Don't promise them that they will ever see a blessing from this, because you don't know if that will be true on this side of heaven. We see God's love at the cross and in the empty tomb. The more that member is hurting, the more you need to point them away from their experience to prove God's love. You need to point them to Jesus. Let the gospel comfort them.

What do you do about anger? Tread lightly. When they rage against you, don't engage them because you aren't the reason they're angry, even if you are the target. You are their shepherd, and it's your job to have big shoulders. It's also your job to lead them to see things differently, especially if they're guilty of sin. I would reiterate the importance of listening and asking questions so that you know what you're dealing with.

Get a clear picture before you hit them with the hammer of God's law, so that you are on target. Be ready with absolution when they confess their sin.

When their anger is directed at the synod at large, don't pretend like synod or district or circuit officials are sinless. Love and respect your circuit pastor and your district president. Defend him, speak well of him and take his words and actions in the kindest possible way. But don't give the impression that he's a pope who is infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra*. We are all sinners, including the men God has called to oversee doctrine and practice. And those men can make mistakes. They can say things that are misunderstood. They can make situations worse rather than better. I don't believe they want to do that, but it serves no purpose for me to be an unreasoning apologist for a situation that I was not a witness to.

So how do you balance these things? Admit to the person you're talking to that you weren't there. You don't know what was said and what wasn't. But you can ask them searching questions. You can offer perspectives they haven't thought about. There is a time and place to go to the district president or the circuit pastor and ask for information – with a view, perhaps even of putting two people together so that they can resolve the situation in a brotherly way. Any circuit pastor or district official worthy of the position will want to find mutual forgiveness and preserve our fellowship.

When the anger is directed at fellow members of the congregation, this presents a different set of challenges. It is very important that you avoid talking out of both sides of your mouth. It's also very important that you understand the difference between hearing someone out so that you can minister to them and listening to gossip. As the book of Proverbs says, "The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him (18:17)." There is a real danger that you will fall into the sin of thinking sinful thoughts against a member you hardly know because another member told you what they think that person did wrong.

Remember Matthew 18. Ask members if they have applied it. Try to bring people together. You can ask if they have spoken to whomever it was that angered them. Urge them to! You can point out that you were not a part of what happened in the past, but God has called you to serve them now. Ask them to listen to the Word you share with them. Finally, you can call them to move on. Show them how many times the New Testament urges us to forgive. Who was God talking to when he inspired those passages? To believers. To Christians in the same congregation who had hurt one another. Teach your members what forgiveness is and what it means.

Be patient. Recognize that one visit rarely overcomes all these kinds of issues. Go back and talk to that person again and again, for as long as it takes. Above all, trust in the gospel to move that heart and to provide repentance and healing and renewal.

### *Ministering to Intellectual Responses*

On one level, intellectual responses are the easiest to deal with. You teach. That's what you're good at. You know the Word and you are trained to apply it. The only question about the doctrinal issues that individuals raise is how best to address them. Do you open your Bible with them and read the qualifications for the ministry or do you talk about them and explain them in the course of a conversation? Both approaches have merit, but it is necessary to teach what God says about these qualifications. Before you



begin a ministry in a church that has suffered this kind of loss, you would do well to review what the Scriptures say about the qualifications and think about how to explain it.

Be aware, however, that people who have not made a habit of coming to Bible class and reading the Word are not ordinarily going to approach this topic the way that St Paul does in the pastoral epistles. You may need to spend some time with them explaining that the ministry is not a job, nor is it a right for the person who has dedicated his life to God. It's a call from the Lord. He decides what the qualifications are. You may want to point out that not everyone can be a pastor. It's a special blessing that God gives where and when he chooses to. Resigning from a divine call or having a divine call terminated is not the same as being fired. Pastors are not employees of their congregations and sometimes, things have to be done differently inside the Church than they would be done outside.

An especially frustrating reality in this situation is that members sometimes confuse repentance with avoiding consequences. Clearly, we do want our members to understand that in Christ we have avoided the greatest consequence of all: hell. No believer is punished for their sins, not even in this life (not in the strict sense of the word). If their pastor is repentant, he wasn't fired as a punishment. But there are consequences to our sins in this life. I often use the example of a drunk driver. If one of my members gets drunk and drives home and slams into a telephone pole, he may be repentant. He may express sorrow for the sin of drunkenness and for disobeying the law and for the selfishness that risked other people's lives and destroyed public property. In that case, I will absolutely assure him that Christ died for those sins and I will announce his full and free forgiveness. But his car is still totaled and if the police officer who arrived on the scene administered a breathalyzer test, his insurance company may not pay for the damages. He may lose his drivers license and perhaps even spend time in jail. He might get fired and miss mortgage payments and lose his house. His wife and children may suffer a serious decrease in their lifestyle. Is God punishing him? No. He is forgiven. But God is disciplining him – teaching him about sin. God in his love and wisdom is allowing him and his family to face real consequences in this life and he has a good and loving purpose for that, no matter how hard it is to face.

But those consequences only apply to this life. When Christ returns or that sinner reaches heaven, all the sadness and sorrow of this life will be wiped away. So it is with the ministry. God has laid down qualifications. And you can speak specifically to what they are and which ones apply in this case. And you can assure your member that God's love and forgiveness do apply to their repentant pastor and his family and in heaven, he will be free. But in this life, there has to be a consequence. God's Word demands it. That is not a refusal of forgiveness. It's a recognition that God is in charge and we trust in him.

When people question the ministry that went on during the time that former pastor was there, teach them the doctrine of the call. That man was God's representative. His sin just shows how great God's grace really is, that he would work through a man like that (and even through a man like you)! Teach them the doctrine of the Means of Grace. Baptism, communion, absolution, the announcement of the forgiveness through Christ in sermons – these things are the power of God. They don't depend on whether or not their pastor is sincere. They don't work better if he is smart or a good speaker or has good

people skills. They work because they are the power of God. Point out St. Paul's words in Philippians 1:14-18a:

Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. <sup>15</sup> It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. <sup>16</sup> The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. <sup>17</sup> The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. <sup>18</sup> But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

St. Paul rejoiced that people who preached the gospel “out of selfish ambition” and “not sincerely” were still preaching the gospel. He trusted that God would work through his message in spite of their sin. We also can trust that God was working in the Word and Sacraments even when they were administered by someone whose own actions disqualified him from the ministry.

I said before that on one level, these are the easiest responses to deal with because they involve doctrine and teaching the Word of God. But they also present a challenge of their own: nobody likes to be wrong. Sinful pride will sometimes cause members to argue themselves into a corner and then they can't admit to you – whom they barely know and don't trust yet – that they're wrong. Give people a chance to digest what God's Word says. Remember Paul's words to Timothy:

Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, <sup>26</sup> and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:25-26).

Of course, this will be even harder if the pastor who left was guilty of false doctrine or unscriptural practice, or if the issues that destroyed his ministry led to sloppy or confusing practices or a general failure to teach clearly. It may require a great deal of patience and gentleness. Remember that the devil is trying to trap your members! Remember they are sinners and saints at the same time. Their new man hears the Word of God even when their old man resists. The point of patience is to give the new man time to win the battle in your member's heart and mind, not to “put up” with their sinful pride. False doctrine and sloppy practice empowered the old man. Put the sword of the Spirit into the hands of the new man!

The hardest intellectual responses may have to do with the way that the synod works. Help your members see that there is a scriptural reason for having men called to supervise doctrine and practice. Whatever happened in this particular case, it is for the good of God's people that we have the structures that we do. Also, admit the limitations. One big limitation is that sinners can't know everything. District presidents (like parish pastors) often are the last to know. Even when there is a hint of something in the air, they have to operate on the basis of Matthew 18 and the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment just like the rest of

us do, so sometimes men remain in the ministry until they crash and burn. Just as there is a high standard for serving in the ministry, so there is a high standard for addressing accusations against men who serve in the ministry, as God declares in 1 Timothy 5:19,20. That's hard on everybody, but there's no real way around it.

### *Ministering to Voluntary Responses*

In some ways, the voluntary responses can be the longest lasting and over the course of your ministry in a congregation that has suffered, they can lead to the most frustration. The factions and the arguing, the distrust and especially the pulling away and inactivity can torment a congregation for years after a resignation or termination. Again, because of the emotion involved, people have trouble letting go of those reactions. Then once they settle into a rut, those practices – the inactivity, the isolation from you and from other church members, the failing to show up for church – become the new normal for them. It takes real effort to pry them out of those ruts.

You will need a long-term approach to these problems. If you are blessed with an active board of elders and a strong, knowledgeable, scripturally oriented leadership, your job will be much easier. But if not, your job will be harder. Recognize that over time, you will need to blend the teaching of stewardship and the effort to recover delinquents into the normal ministry of your church. But in the short term, as you deal with individuals, you will need to know when to back off. Sometimes putting pressure on a person who's hurt and struggling is bad for their faith. But you will also need to know when to encourage them to put the past aside and rejoin the active membership of your church. You will need to have the courage to confront self-absorption with the law and comfort contrition over that sin with the gospel. But you must also remember that God does not call you to change hearts. He calls you to minister. Only the Holy Spirit can change hearts.

### *The Former Pastor and His Family*

One complicating factor to your ministry to the congregation needs special attention: the continuing presence of the former pastor or members of his family either in your congregation or in another congregation that is close enough to yours that your members continue to see and interact with him and his family. Under ordinary circumstances, you would expect the pastor (and presumably his family) to leave the congregation after he resigns or is terminated, but this does not always happen. Sometimes, the pastor leaves, but his family remains. This is most often because of a divorce. If the wife has custody of the children, she may stay in the area and their children may attend your school and you may even confirm them. If the pastor already owns a home near your congregation, it may be very difficult for him to relocate. Even if he lived in a parsonage, members of the congregation may provide housing for him or even help him secure gainful employment, both of which then keep him and his family in the area. Even if he changes membership, if you have the only Lutheran elementary school nearby, his children may continue to attend your school. If his children attend another Lutheran elementary school that regularly plays yours in sports or if they attend an area Lutheran high school in your area, your members will continue to have contact with him.

Obviously, this greatly complicates the emotional reactions of your members. Those who knew him well and liked him and who want him back will be able to continue to have regular contact with him. They may become privy to information other people don't have. Unfortunately, they may also be unable to critically evaluate what their former pastor tells them. He may not be deliberately deceiving them, but he is going to talk from his point of view and that may greatly complicate your job. In some congregations, this has led to lengthy discussions about how much more support the congregation owes that former pastor or in love, how much more the congregation can do for his family, which often struggles in the first months and even years after he leaves the ministry.

On the other hand, those members who were particularly hurt by his actions may find any efforts by the congregation to reach out financially or emotionally to the former pastor's family offensive. They may find it difficult to see him and his family. Even if he has transferred his membership, his presence and that of his family could prolong the process of stabilizing the ministry.

You should not automatically assume that the pastor and his family cannot ever participate in your congregation. My best advice is to sit down with the family (or families if there has been a divorce) and set ground rules. Don't force them out (because that causes them to dig in their heels), but ask them to consider the good of the entire congregation. If the children are in your school, their parents are school parents and have as much right to be at school events (sports, singing in church, etc.) as anybody else. But they need to recognize that they have no more input than anybody else and they have a far greater responsibility to avoid undermining your ministry. The congregation needs to move on. You may find yourself in situations in which you have to remind that former pastor that he is not called to be pastor there anymore. You may have to tread very carefully with his children.

Those members who are emotionally on one side or the other may need very frank conversations with you. You may need to ask them to be fair to the wife and children of their former pastor who need the ministry of the congregation. You may need to ask them to recognize the change that has taken place in ministry and to support it with their words and deeds.

## **Strategies for Ministering to the Congregation Corporately**

You do not only deal with members privately. You are a public servant of the Word and your public ministry needs to address the law and the gospel to the real lives of your members. If God has called you to serve a congregation going through this kind of crisis, you will need to deal with the true spiritual state of the congregation as a whole in your public ministry. How do you proceed?

The first answer is the obvious answer: you must never stop proclaiming law and gospel. That is the most important thing you can do in that situation. If anything else is your priority, you need to ask yourself if you don't have a problem trusting in the promises God attaches to the Means of Grace. So no matter how large the congregation is, you must take the time to properly prepare your sermons. If anything, it is more vital in this situation than in the last congregation you served. You must prepare Bible classes that lead God's people deeper into the Word. Even if only a small percentage of people

show up for them, you are cultivating the healed and matured Christians of the next phase of that congregation's existence.

At its heart, what you are trying to do in this situation is to restore trust in the ministry. Since the ministry is God's institution, you need to build up the faith of God's people so that they trust that God really did know what he was doing when he sent that previous pastor and allowed their congregation to go through the "disaster" that his ministry became. And God has sent you, too. As you all know, the only way to build up faith is through the Means of Grace. So Sunday after Sunday, you need to preach the whole counsel of God. You need to apply law and gospel across the whole range of issues that God's people face. Each time you do that, the Holy Spirit is working and building their faith. And again, by a miracle of God's grace, each time you are the voice God uses to lead them to see their sin and see their Savior, God is increasing their trust in you as their shepherd.

### *Preaching Strategies*

You do need to address the very specific realities that church is facing. Make speaking openly and plainly about the immediate past a hallmark of your ministry. By that, I don't mean that it should always come up. But don't be afraid of talking about the resignation from the pulpit. Several times in the course of each year, the pericope has texts that speak of suffering and sorrow, of the ministry of the Word, of love and fellowship. During the first year you are there, when those texts came up, make application to your congregation's recent past and what God promises us and what God calls us to do (without breaking the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment, of course). Generally speaking, the members will appreciate this forthright approach.

Consider a summer series on the seven churches of Asia Minor in the book of Revelation. Where it is appropriate, point out how your congregation shares similarities with those churches (especially if doctrine and practice have not been handled carefully). Also make a theme of the truth that "there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Churches have suffered what your church suffered for as long as sin has been in the world. God's grace was always there. God's grace will not fail your congregation, even if it ceases to exist. Set the tone of a confessional, law and gospel ministry that understands where your people are and wants to provide healing in Christ.

But also know when to be done. Generally speaking, when someone loses a spouse, it will take a year for them to deal with their grief. It's not an absolute rule. Some people heal faster. Some people need help and support much longer. But it's a good rule of thumb. It applies to congregations, too. They need to go through a cycle of the church year with their new pastor. They need to have school open and close, to have summer schedule and fall schedule start and finish. They need to celebrate the great festivals and remember the life of Christ in their new situation. Day by day, as God applies the work of Christ to them, he heals them. He restores order and harmony. He gives growth in faith and the ability to trust that he is doing all things for the good of his Church, even in the upheavals that they have gone through. Be prepared to move on as your congregation moves on.

### *Bible Class Strategies*

You may identify specific doctrinal issues or issues of congregational practice that need to be addressed. Of course, you want to address those issues clearly and publicly, in both sermons and Bible class. But again, patience is necessary. Luther spent years preparing the congregation in Wittenberg to receive communion in both kinds.

Don't just announce that you're going to deal with all the doctrinal and practical problems of the congregation in one Bible class series. Instead, identify the "big" issues and prioritize them in terms of the urgency they hold in your situation. Then deal with them one by one, both in Bible class (where you can address them in the greatest depth) and also with your leadership. Lead your council and elders to see why these issues must be addressed and how you plan to go about it.

But there is wisdom in giving them a chance to both absorb what you're teaching and to grow in trust in you through a comprehensive pattern of faithfulness to the Scripture. So maybe you spend six or seven weeks on a specific issue that the congregation needs to hear about. Then you spend some time on something routine – reading a book of the Bible, a topical study that is of general interest but that isn't under fire, a practical series that shows your concern for their souls and for the Word of God. Then go on to your next topic. You do have to be committed to hitting them all. But give people a chance to see you as their shepherd and not as a doctrinal policeman. Gently lead them out of the trap the devil has been trying to set for them.

### *Every Member Visit*

Another absolutely essential thing to do after a resignation or termination is an every member visit. (I include this here because it is a program for the whole congregation, even though you will be meeting with individual households.) I know we all were taught at the seminary to do this whenever we come to a new church, but I also have the impression that a fair number of men think it's not really worth the effort. But it is invaluable when you come after this kind of difficulty. Understand, not everyone will see the benefit. Some members will insist that you have more important things to do (deal with the financial crisis, the membership crisis, etc.) without seeing that this *is* crisis management. You may even have to insist in the face of your congregation's leadership.

Why is this so important? Because congregations are made up of individual Christians. Many will already be dropping away. Many will be hurt and angry and confused. They need their shepherd to hear what was wrong. They need their shepherd to minister to them and lead them back to the Word. It will take months, even a year or more. There will probably be a minority of people who refuse to meet with you. But most of those who do will think it was worthwhile.

During that every member visit program, ask very specific questions. Ask how often they come to church and Bible class, of course. But also ask how they feel about what has happened. Ask about their relationship with the previous pastor and their understanding of what went on. Listen very carefully to what they say and how they say it. This will give you an opportunity to minister. It will also give you the opportunity to see how deep the hurt is and how far it runs in the congregation. As the process goes on, you should be able to detect a subtle change in the timbre of the conversations. They will grow less hysterical and less emotional. They will help you to gauge how much longer to put an emphasis on the resignation or termination as a central issue in the congregation.

### *Prioritize Your Ministry*

When you follow a resignation, you need to stabilize the situation. I am not a big fan of “ministry plans,” but you might want to write one that first year that you are there. Specifically state that your goal for the first year is stabilizing the ministry. Explain that you won’t be putting a great deal of energy even into specific outreach efforts because you need a functioning congregation to serve as a platform for your future outreach efforts. Now, don’t blow efforts that God drops into your lap! Follow up on those situations and start a Bible Information Class for them. It will be very encouraging for the congregation to see adults confirmed even in the aftermath of that controversy. But after a resignation or a termination, restoring trust in the ministry is the priority. It’s not the exclusive priority, but it does become number one, for a time.

In the short term, be very cautious of radical changes – cutting teachers, closing schools, amalgamating ministries. Before, I compared the congregation’s experience to a death. One of the observations that counselors make after a sudden death is that the survivors shouldn’t make radical changes right away. Some counselors will urge them to wait at least a year. The thinking is that even if the change is good, the person making the change is not emotionally equipped to deal with the sudden increase in stress the change usually brings. This may color or even poison how they view something that should have been constructive. This does apply to congregations as well. Even if the change is something they need to consider, it is always better to stabilize the situation first. Too much change too quickly can cause a general panic in the congregation. It can also antagonize people who are hurting and prevent healing. It can do further damage to the fellowship of believers.

### **Deliberating a Call to a Congregation that has had a Resignation or Termination**

Obviously, it’s a lot of work to come into a congregation after a resignation or a termination. Why would you ever do it? For no other reason than that you received a divine call to come and serve the Lord at that place. But how do you deliberate a call like that?

In some ways, no differently than any other. You have to evaluate the gifts God has given you against the ministry in that place and the one you’re currently serving. You have to ask where you can do the most good for the kingdom. Sometimes, it’s by letting someone else shepherd a situation like that. Sometimes, it’s by coming and trusting that God has given you the gifts and more importantly, the tools in his Word that you will need to serve there.

But there are some special things to think about as you are deliberating such a call. I will tell you that the call to Livonia was the most difficult call decision I ever had to make – far more difficult than accepting a world mission call was. In fact, I actually declined the call one Saturday night and called the vacancy pastor very early on Sunday morning and asked him not to announce that. I accepted the next week.

In the case of a congregation that has gone through this kind of difficulty, it is important to take the time to reach an answer in your own mind. Because the wheels have come off, the leadership of the congregation will be eager for you to make a

decision quickly, either way. Especially if you're going to decline, they want to go on to the next guy. But you need to have enough backbone to stand up to that pressure so that you can make a decision that is God pleasing. If you struggle with it for a while, that might be God's way of training them to be patient with his way of working in the Church.

As you consider the call, recognize that if you accept it, there will be positives and negatives in that ministry. One negative feature is that there is no way that you can really find out all that's going on. You should get as much of the history as you can so that you go in with your eyes open. But you can't know everything. Each member is a series of questions: how involved was he or she? How do they feel? What do they want to see now?

Another negative reality is that some people are going to view you as the synod clean-up man. This is especially true among those people who are unhappy with the way that the district or circuit handled the resignation or termination. They may identify you with the removal. In a more general sense, some people will get the idea that you're "a transitional figure." You're just there to clean things up and prepare for the next guy to come. In three or four years, you'll be gone. So some people will try to wait you out. Others may refuse to get close to you because you're not staying anyway.

Another negative in taking such a call is that you will definitely pay for what went before. In a thousand ways, it will affect your ministry. You will constantly be trying to lower the emotional temperature, to reorient the membership to the Word and Sacraments as the reason they are there. You will have to deal with the emotion that's in the air.

But there are some positives to serving that congregation: you were not part of whatever happened. You don't know any more about it than you were told. You can honestly say that you are praying for the pastor who left (provided that you do, of course).

And you know that in every congregation there are people who are simply longing for a shepherd to come. They are tired of the upheaval. They are tired of all the bad feelings and defeatism. They are tired of the factions and they are prepared to love you as long as you are prepared to serve them faithfully.

As you deliberate the call, it is extremely important to get as much information as possible. If there is a Lutheran elementary school, I would encourage you to talk to every teacher and get each one's perspective on the total ministry there (not just the resignation/termination). Talk to every council member and to the leadership of the ladies' group, if there is one. Of course, you want to talk to the circuit pastor and the district president. You need to prepare yourself for a ministry that will begin with a concentrated effort at healing and reorientation and renewal, rather than a ministry that will simply continue what's been going on in the past.

Finally, you need to be careful not to misstate the doctrine of the call. Sometimes we almost sound like enthusiasts when we talk about God leading us to accept or decline a call. If you're waiting for God to send the angel Gabriel and tell you whether you should stay or go, you're going to wrestle with a call like this. Seeking God's will does not mean seeking a supernatural revelation of what you should do with the call. It means listening to the advice and counsel of your brothers in the ministry. It means evaluating the situation on the ground in your current call and in the one that you are considering. It means listening to your wife and thinking deeply and seriously about what impact moving or staying will have on her and on your family. It means praying and asking God



for insight in all this. It means honestly evaluating the gifts God has given you. And it means making a choice – a free choice – to stay or go and then trusting that God will bless you either way. Whatever choice you make, God has brought you to a new place or kept you where you are. That’s the miracle in the way he works. He hides himself behind all those other things and he guides our lives.

## **Are You Up to the Task?**

Serving a congregation that has suffered the loss of their pastor through a resignation or a termination can be a very difficult kind of ministry. When I was deliberating the call to my previous congregation, the circuit pastor for that church told me: “They just need someone to come and love them.” When I was deliberating my current call, someone that was familiar with the situation told me, “They just need a shepherd.” Loving shepherding is finally what you are trying to.

But who is up to that task especially after all that has gone before in a church like that? No sinner is. The truth is, none of us are up to the demands of the ministry no matter where we serve. It’s only with the strength that God provides that we continue. It’s only with the tools he gives that we can serve at all. If you ever serve a church that has gone through this kind of upheaval, you are going to make mistakes in your ministry. Even though you get paid to talk, you may do a very poor job of communicating. You may drive people away instead of drawing them closer to the cross. You may do a lousy job of thinking on your feet and confuse law and gospel or fail to provide clear guidance. You may increase the hurt when you wanted to help. You may even sin against your new (and potentially difficult) members in a moment of frustration or defensiveness or fear.

And in this kind of a situation, people will let you know. They will vote with their feet and stop coming to church. They will express their anger or frustration with you. What are you to do? When you are guilty, go to the throne of grace and confess to your Lord that you have not been the servant he called you to be. Walk away trusting in his forgiveness. Have the humility to not only say you are sorry to that member, but to ask them to forgive you. When you feel that you are being treated unfairly, seek comfort in the God of all grace. Remember that he suffered unfairly for you and he calls you to share in his sufferings so that you may share in his glory (2 Thessalonians 2:14; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

Remember that you, too, are a combination of intellect, emotion and will. You, too, are a sinner and a saint at the same time. So you, too, need the strength and comfort that only God can provide. Make use of your circuit pastor and of your brothers in the ministry. Confess to them so that they can absolve you. Talk to them so that they can encourage you to remain faithful and share the wisdom God has given them to guide you in the specifics that you are wrestling with. And trust in God who works through the Means of Grace and who called you to serve.

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.” God in his grace sometimes causes congregations to face times to weep and mourn, just as surely as he sends them times to laugh and dance. When a pastor has to resign or has his call terminated, it is rightly a time to mourn. If God calls you to serve a congregation during that time of mourning, he knows what he is doing by sending you there. And he calls you simply to be faithful in applying the work of Christ to that church in that time.

If you are particularly blessed, he will allow you to see the times change again in that place to times of laughing and dancing. But it is all in his hands. May he give us the faith and the wisdom to trust that what he sends our churches is best for them and for us. God bless you and the congregations you serve. To him be the glory.