

What Will the Congregation Do When They Leave the Service?

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Background

I'm a lifelong WELS product of almost 52 years now. Since the "Garden Homes" congregation in Milwaukee didn't have a Christian Day School at the time, I don't have that background. My experience in church through my high school years included ushering, choir (where I met my wife), and altar boy to Pastor Erhard Pankow. Though we came to Wisconsin Rapids about 28 years ago, I've only been active on the Council for the last 20 or so.

It seems that about 15 years ago, I became aware that the services were not impacting me as I thought they could. One of our vicars of that era related the experiences of his class and how they'd taken special measures in chapel not to let the service become a routine or subconscious effort. That sparked further interest in the subject and sometime, about 10 years, ago, I decided I should write a book with a title something like, "What Laymen Need From a Pastor." Well, I can procrastinate with the best of them, so although I made frequent notes and, occasionally, wrote a few scattered pages, there still is no book.

In the meantime, the Lord has exposed me to a wide variety of learning experiences, including positions of leadership in church, the military, business, the community and Toastmasters. Right from the start, aptitude tests told me He'd blessed me with an extra measure of empathy, too. All that's been supplemented by the examples of good Christians and numerous dedicated pastors.

This background has led me to believe that there is a great deal of room for improvement in most WELS worship services. I think that through more meaningful services and the blessings of the Holy Spirit there is the potential to:

1. Make the Sunday service a thrilling and inspiring combination of worship and spiritual growth.
2. Produce more members that show evidence of belonging to the invisible church through their visible actions.
3. Increase the WELS growth rate to well beyond the one-half percent growth range we currently experience.

I view each service as an opportunity to:

- a. Worship our Lord.
- b. Lead to the basic faith in Christ.
- c. Promote growth in faith, evangelism, and stewardship.

Though blessed opportunities, these also are ominous responsibilities entrusted to you pastors; and all to be done in one hour per week. That is why I feel so strongly that none of the 50 to 70 hours in your overburdened week are as important as the hours you spend leading and preparing worship services. Consider further that it is only that hour of "worship" that:

There is the opportunity to communicate to hundreds (except small churches) of people simultaneously.

Most of the congregation gets its "main course" of weekly nourishment in God's Word. No matter how important and rewarding it may seem to work at the one-on-one level during the

week, the message conveyed through a worship service is more important because it can impact many, many more souls.

Then, besides the “service hours”, the next most important hours of the pastoral week are those spent in preparation for the service. Undoubtedly, this must be a source of constant turmoil for dedicated pastors, trying to balance the daily pressures of ministering to individuals or families against the time required to prepare a meaningful and inspiring service. I feel that all too often it is easier to defer or sacrifice the service preparation time.

Using the old adage, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” we should conclude that the pastor’s best approach to promote and build true faith is through well prepared services for the bulk of the congregation, rather than counseling hundreds of individual problems that result from very weak or absent faith.

A close analogy in the business world is the company safety program, of which there are two extremes. The first attends primarily to all the production, quality, and cost concerns, while giving safety only mundane lip service. This results in a terrible overburden of “fire fighting”, paperwork, lost production time, and personal suffering or death.

The second approach is to establish an aggressive preventive safety program, which demonstrates the obvious concern and dedication of top management. This typically includes extensive training of every employee to be safety conscious and concerned not only for themselves, but for the safety of others around them. This results in a top notch safety record, with good morale, production, quality, etc. all thrown in as bonuses. Thus, the preventive safety program saves far more time and money than the initial program training ever required. I think the similarities to the ministry are quite obvious. A “preventive” ministry can work through well prepared services in the same way.

I can also reflect on the “preventive ministry” approach from my own experiences in recent years. Seven years ago, when our youngest son was in a coma for 16 days after an accident, we could tell others how good our Lord had been to us all our lives and how it probably was time for a faith-strengthening test. Or, as my wife and I prepared for her ultimate death over the last two years, we knew that whatever God had in mind, it was for our good and the good of His Kingdom here on earth. Through God’s Grace, we were prepared in advance for these trials so the pastors didn’t have to make a last ditch effort to bring us to faith.

In the last year preceding my wife’s death, I had another unique experience worth mentioning. It was the first time in 19 years that I wasn’t on the church council and actively participating in other activities and it surprised (scared) me to realize how much of my spiritual growth had been coming from the activities and how little had been coming from the services. I really felt out of touch with our church during that period, and another formerly active councilman has related a similar experience at a recent committee meeting. This example is not intended to degrade our two current pastors; on the contrary, St. Paul’s certainly has a more meaningful service format than most due to the extra efforts of the pastors.

In any way I can, I hope to help you plan and present worship services that are as meaningful and inspiring as possible. I pray that the Holy Spirit will work through this paper and through all pastors concerned about our worship services so our members will leave our services as charged-up Christians ready for any crisis and that a stranger will exclaim, “God is really among you!”

Attention

There will be a test on today’s lesson! These are chilling words to any class or audience. Perhaps you even cringed a bit as I said them, not knowing if I was serious or not.

Why do we test? There must be a good reason because schools, businesses and even churches use tests. The answer is that *tests measure results*. They tell us:

How the students are doing. Are they grasping the information? Are they able to apply what they learned?

How the teacher is doing. Is he or she effective in conveying the message? Does he or she inspire the class to learn and to want to learn more?

Besides the many uses of tests in the secular world, we, within “the church”, use them too. A common test this time of year is the Confirmation examination to tell us how well our confirmands have grasped the basic elements of doctrine and faith. Most Bible class outlines are structured with questions at the end to test whether or not we got the point intended. Tests are sometimes used before and after a Bible Information Class series, and they are, obviously, used extensively in our Christian Day Schools.

I wonder, though, what we’d find if we tested after a worship service. We, obviously, wouldn’t really do this in practice, but let’s consider what we might learn from tests to follow-up our services. Let’s imagine a test to determine, “What will the congregation do as a result of the service?” or, more simply,

“What Will They Do When They Leave?”

We might ask result oriented questions like:

Did you really worship today? Did you realize what you were saying or singing?

How will you apply the sermon this next week? List two ways.

Explain what you learned from the readings and how they helped your personal faith.

Or, to evaluate service content and presentation, we could ask:

What was the main purpose or theme of the service?

Explain the message of the first hymn. Do the same for the other hymns.

What was the sermon title? What was the sermon text?

Paraphrase the prayers in your own words.

What part of the church season is this?

Or, what would the results be if we used those same five questions:

One hour after the service?

Six hours after the service?

One day after the service?

Six days after the service?

How would a typical WELS service stand up to such a test? How would you answer these questions for *your* last service?

Relate

More specifically, what is a typical service like in your congregation? How much is worship (we talking to God)? How much is learning (God talking to us)? What do you feel is a proper split for these two functions? Moreover, what do you feel the purpose of a “Sunday Service” really is?

Another major consideration is how important the service is relative to your other responsibilities. Do you spend so much time on service preparation that other aspects of your

ministry suffer? Are you satisfied that your service preparation and your other tasks are in proper balance? What is proper balance? How important is the weekly service to the growth and maturing of your congregation?

Finally, what does your congregation do after they leave the service? What occupies their other 167 hours per week? If you had tested 10 people who only attend worship services (not Bible class, etc.) last year and again this year, would they have grown spiritually?

None of these questions have clear objective answers, but I think they are good for self-evaluation periodically.

Yes, there certainly will be a test that every soul in your congregation will have to take some day. I pray that through meaningful worship services, all will have the right answer when God our Lord tests us with the question, "Why should I let you into heaven?"

Illustrate

If I were to summarize my needs in a service, they would fall in the general categories of clarity and simplicity and I was pleased to learn from a 1987 paper by Pastor Bryan Gerlach that Luther seems to support this. I repeat from that paper, quoting Luther from his German Mass, the author writes, "Luther says public worship should be geared to the young Christian and potential Christians." In prayers and the liturgy, for instance, it is most helpful when the pastor speaks in words and phrases that I might use. Even though I have a better than average education, I often find prayers too abstract and sophisticated. Then I feel as if I'm back in the Old Testament with Aaron or his sons just representing me to God, while I stand outside the tent. I want to understand a prayer and feel as if I'm saying it with the pastor.

Likewise, even the Sampler liturgy is not readily grasped; "Lift up your hearts, for instance. Or, in the congregation's response in the Epiphany prayer, "You ushered in the day of grace so long foretold" and "Arouse us and our missionaries to flood the whole work with your Gospel light." These sound eloquent, and I'm sure God understands, but in the six seconds that I have to say them, they don't have much meaning to me.

Beyond the clarity and simplistic issue is the problem of retention of the messages for future use. It would be wonderful if the congregation would benefit from the message for a week or more, but that takes a special effort by the pastor to convey a strong theme and then "tie" it to certain "retention aids" that will act as reminders.

The competition for the congregation's interest and attention is keen. All week they see and hear polished newscasters conveying a variety of secular messages; and many of those messages stick with us, as evidenced by daily discussions of news, weather, and sports. Many of us also listen to Christian radio with some of the top communicators in the country. The typical overburdened WELS pastor is hard pressed to compete with such sophisticated communications, but I think it's imperative that you try and the Holy Spirit will make up for your human deficiencies. I pray that the following examples and opportunities will be of benefit to you and to the expansion of our Lord's Kingdom on earth. They are intended to make a difference in what your congregation will do after they leave the service.

The Overall Service

Purpose - As God tells us to be orderly in 1 Corinthians, a basic element of orderliness is having a purpose. Not just the general one of spreading His Word, but a specific purpose for the service. A pastor should ask himself, "What do I want to accomplish in this hour?" "What specific forms of worship should I include?" "What do I expect the congregation to do as a result of this

service?” “What do I want them to remember and learn?” “What will they do when they leave?” A worship service, like any meeting or speech, needs that sort of a goal. If you don’t have a goal, how do you know what to aim for or which direction to head? A “Worship Service Planning Guide” is attached and has proven very useful at St. Paul’s. It helps to lay out a theme and various service elements all on one page. To jump into this full outline in one leap would obviously not work, but the beauty of the guide is that you can use as much as you like and gradually expand at a pace you and the church find acceptable.

For instance, you can begin with as little as listing the date, hymns, readings, text, sermon title, etc. A completed example is also included to show the stage of development St. Paul’s is at now. Try it and please give us some feedback as to how it works.

To dwell on “purpose” a little further, there are actually multiple purposes to consider in parallel with the main objective or goal of the day. A few that I can think of are:

To provide opportunities for worship that will be meaningful and inspiring to the congregation.

To comfort the troubled and show there is a loving God to lean on.

To make a visitor want to come back to hear and learn more about salvation.

To have the congregation gain some knowledge that will strengthen their faith or make them more effective workers.

To inspire the congregation to want to do more for God’s Kingdom.

To encourage individuals to attend Bible classes.

And, I’m sure you have others. To incorporate all these in a single service is an ominous task and one that I don’t envy. Nevertheless, none of these should overshadow the single goal or purpose you select for a service.

Theme - Perhaps the most distracting and defeating element I’ve seen in a service is multiple themes. That is when the readings seem unrelated, or the sermon isn’t supported by the hymns, or the prayers don’t reinforce the sermon, etc. The most helpful aid in learning, and feeling part of the worship, and remembering the service, is a single and obvious theme. Still better, we’ve found, is to announce what that theme is at the opening of the service. It’s a beautiful experience to leave a service feeling that you’ve truly worshiped God and learned more about Him, particularly when that main theme can still be recalled days later.

Preparation - I know how difficult it must be to set aside adequate preparation time when faced with the routine tasks of a normal week, plus all the “fires” that must be fought. I can only reemphasize my firm belief that strong, meaningful, inspiring services will, with time, gradually diminish the crises you face and even provide relief for routine duties that laymen can do. It may be true that an inspiring service is less important to a very small or mission congregation where contact with members is easier, but I have no doubt that it is a top priority item in large congregations. Whether we like it or not, most of the congregation relies far too heavily on the Sunday service for their spiritual well-being. There is a common mind-set (not only in WELS) that after I’m confirmed all I have to do is attend Sunday services. I know, I’ve been there myself. That means for most congregations, the primary way to reach and motivate the majority of the members is through that one hour per week. As I reflect on that, sometimes I wonder if even devoting half the week to service preparation would be enough—considering the importance of that one hour.

Introduction and Greeting - Except for the fact that we’ve always done it that way,

doesn't it seem strange that we typically don't have a greeting and introduction to our services? Where else would you go that you would sit down and begin the proceedings without one or both of these two elements? Would a teacher walk into a class and start spouting technical terms without a good morning or a brief statement as to what the subject was going to be? Or, how about a business meeting or a plane flight or an athletic event? Christian radio shows place special emphasis on the introduction, typically given by someone other than the main speaker. They set the stage and arouse interest for what is to follow.

Three years ago, we attended a confirmation of a close friend. I can still picture that pastor as he stepped up to the pulpit with a big smile and a friendly "good morning" followed by a brief comment on the purpose of the confirmation service. It gave me a neat, warm, welcome feeling even though I was in a strange church of another denomination. At St. Paul's, we have a greeting prior to the first reading and, generally, a statement regarding the theme at the beginning. Both of these have been well accepted and it should not be a big move to combine both at the opening of the service to make all feel welcome for the entire service, in fact, it's been done at least once.

A children's section was added several years ago, borrowed from a sister congregation. That, too, is well accepted and has been modified more recently to reflect our needs. Basically, it is just a children's song plus a more simply worded prayer. Strangely enough, I sometimes find that the most meaningful part of the service as a 51-year old "child" of God.

I look forward to a time when a stranger would walk into any WELS church and react as in 1 Cor. 14:25½, "So he will fall down and worship God exclaiming, God is really among you!"

The Audience

In the world of speakers and teachers, a common phrase is "Know your audience." With such a varied audience, how do you prepare a worship service? Who's out there and what are their needs? This is probably another question you must wrestle with constantly. Perhaps I see that audience differently than you, since I've been in various "categories" over the years and even have shifted into and out of some categories.

The church council, active voters, Bible class members and their families are logically most familiar to you as pastor. They are among the most active with evidence of stewardship and usually strong faith. With repeated contacts it's easy and likely to think of them as your congregation, as the people you're preaching to or designing a service for. I think that's a major stumbling block. This group is *not* your congregation! They are, perhaps, only 5-10 percent of your congregation. Although they certainly need strengthening and reassurance and counseling, it is the other 90-95 percent (we might make the comparison here to "but where are the nine?") that should be considered the target audience. Of course, even that 90 percent is a random target of age groups and educational backgrounds. Now days, age can vary from zero on into the 90's and education extends from a recent PhD graduate to a lower grade graduate in a one room school house of 70 years ago. Add to that visitors who may have no faith at all or maybe a misguided faith of another religious group.

Yet with all that diversity, there may be a reasonable solution. I believe that is to aim at about a third grader. I understand that the advertising world uses similar guidelines, but it's probably even more appropriate when conveying the Word of God. Basic doctrine really is quite simple, so why complicate it?

The obvious criticism to this approach is that it may put down or demean all those with a fourth grade education or more. Well, I think I'm in a good position to put that concern to rest. I

have an engineering degree and over 28 years of experience. I've led business, state, and national committees in both technical and political matters. I'm responsible for a \$33 million company and a director for three companies. And, I can still be thrilled to sing,

I want to live for Jesus
And please Him every day.
He died in pain and sorrow
To take my sins away.

because of its beautiful, simplistic words. And I can still break into tears as I did last week when we closed our communion service with Hymn 309, "O Jesus Blessed Lord to Thee." There is real meaning in those words if we sing them sincerely.

Please try to empathize with us. Visualize us as little children who need help in understanding and talking to our God. Explain His great gift to us in the simplest terms. I like to think of it like this:

God expects us to be perfect.
But we are sinners in daily thoughts, words and deeds.
Therefore, we cannot be saved by ourselves.
So, God sent His Son to be perfect in our place, as a man.
That Son even died for us, as we should have.
Then He rose from the dead as proof He was God.
There is nothing we can do or need to do to be saved.

Only believe 1-7.

Now, why can't we just say that in a service? I think the young Christian and the potential Christian could grasp that.

Readings, Psalms, Texts, Creeds

There are vast opportunities to communicate in the presentation of readings, Psalms, texts and creeds, but in some cases, I have seen these opportunities totally ignored. That is, these elements of the service are too often read without comment or explanation, either before or after the reading. That leaves only the Scriptural quotes themselves to communicate a message to the congregation and how many of them are clear and understandable all by themselves? Adding explanations can really make these readings great teaching and worshiping media. All the following have been used to some extent in congregations, perhaps in your own services. These can be applied primarily to the readings, Psalms, texts and also, to a limited extent, the creeds.

Relevance to Theme of Service - Using readings that don't relate directly to a common theme, in a sense, is like taking quotes out of context. That is, they lose their meaning and impact. Even with popular pericopes there often is no obvious or apparent connection between Old and New Testament readings or between the readings and the text. But, when each one relates to the same subject, they reinforce each other. If one reading out of a pericope does not seem to relate to the rest of the service you've planned, why use it at all? If I was giving a paper on water turbines, why should I throw in a few paragraphs on steam turbines unless I could relate them some way to make a point?

Introduction - I get so much more out of a reading when it's prefaced with a brief introduction. Answers to the following questions are helpful.

What preceded this event? A comment about earlier verses would help.

Where did this happen?

Who's the author? Even for a letter to the Corinthians, I'm not sure how many in the congregation know who the author was. But, especially, for a book like Acts or Hebrews, it would be helpful to hear some commentary on authorship, at least occasionally.

Who's addressing who? For a short reading in particular it's often not obvious who is speaking or to whom.

Why was statement made? This may not be clear unless the background (No. 1) is explained.

Selection and Length - Even when a pericope suggests readings on a common theme, the use of every verse suggested isn't always ideal. I've seen cases where adding a verse or two at either end or deleting some in between can be very helpful to clarity of meaning. In this sense, I'm referring to the actual message of the words and the train of thought developed. In another sense, just the length of an extensive reading can be a deterrent to understanding. I frequently can grasp the beginning of a selection, but then lose virtually all meaning as it drags on with verse after verse. Parables are an exception to this. *Again*, please empathize with us. You have studied God's Word probably most of your life; you've spent, perhaps, hours the previous week studying select passages, but we are only hearing it read in the span of a few seconds, maybe for the first time in our life. How are we to understand without your help and consideration?

Bible Translation - Among those translations generally accepted by WELS, some are more obviously understandable than others and some infer slightly different meanings of the same passage on non-critical issues. Have you ever considered reading the same passage from two translations and pointing out why and where the differences are? I did it once in a Bible class with good apparent effect. Similarly, for Psalms used for responsive readings, Beck's translation is generally more comprehensible than even the NIV.

Reading Pace - Again, we need your consideration. We've, perhaps, not seen or heard a particular passage ever or for years, even though it is fresh and clear in your mind. When the wording is not clear and obvious, a slower pace with pauses is very helpful and much appreciated. Some think that makes a reading drab, but in Toastmasters, a pause is considered a highly effective tool. Voice inflection is also easier at a slower pace and that builds on both appeal and understanding. I've also noticed that a pastor generally sets the pace for the congregation in a responsive reading, i.e., when he rushes through his part, they'll rush through their part too.

Explanations - How many readings in our services are perfectly clear without explanation? At my intelligence level and biblical background, I find few that I can grasp in a single pass without interpretation. Perhaps I've grown too dependent on radio ministers who frequently explain phrase by phrase as they move through a passage. I think they set a good example. One of our WELS pastors has told me he always explains a reading, usually after it's read, but sometimes before and, occasionally, both. If you don't think a passage is clear without interpretation, should you use it at all? Would it add anything to the service besides time? The creeds deserve a little separate attention. They are a means by which we confess our faith in each service and I believe that fact deserves a bit of commentary prior to their presentation.

Hymns

Hymns are probably the least effective element in our entire service—at least they are for me. It's fun to sing, but I have a terrible time extracting meaning from most hymns. But, there are ways to combat this dilemma that I'm sure affects more than just me.

Relationship to Theme - Some of our forefathers saw this need when they grouped

hymns into categories of church seasons and events. But, not every hymn in the Lent group, for instance, fits a particular Lenten theme you may have chosen, so it takes further selection to optimally support your theme. Again, when the readings, prayers, Psalm, sermon, and hymns are carefully intertwined, they support each other and they promote retention, hopefully, for days or even weeks.

Titles and Verses - I hope you look beyond the title in selecting hymns. We recently encountered one which matched a theme in the title and in the first line of the first verse, but that was all. Yet, we sang all verses. Do you read every verse of every hymn you select? Should you?

For many hymns, the verses have already been selected from the full complement the author originally wrote. I think further selection is very beneficial. For those hymns which I've studied (words only, I don't pretend to be a musician) there commonly is a dead or drab verse or two which actually may detract from the hymn's overall message. We've not had trouble weeding them out by clearly announcing or posting that we will sing only verses 1 and 2 and 7 and 8, for instance, as we did in today's service (as I write this.) Or, many verses can become draining unless they're "grabbers". I usually find I'm distracted around verse number 5 or 6, but maybe that's just a personal problem I have. One of the exceptions to this rule would be Hymn No. 200.

Melody - A tough melody can destroy the effect of a hymn. We just had one a few weeks ago. The words were beautiful and rich, but it bombed out due to a complex melody.

If we can identify these in advance, why not just speak the words while reading from the hymnal. That would convey the message better and it would emphasize the fact that hymns do have meanings that we should be looking for as we sing them.

Introductions - Though we're utilizing introductions at St. Paul's, I don't think they're perfected yet. This is a tough technique to master since there's often a lot of ground to cover (4-5 verses) and yet these hymn introductions probably should not be over a few sentences. We hit on some good ones, but some just seem to roll off on me. I find it most helpful when a specific reference is made to words, phrases, or verses. The concept of introducing hymns, though, seems to have real merit. Any insight anyone has gained from their own experience would be appreciated.

Gimmicks or Tactics - If a gimmick is defined as a means to get a point across, then the following are gimmicks. Otherwise, think of them as tactics. There are a lot of ways to give hymns special emphasis and each of you has probably used some of your own tactics. A few that I don't see often are:

Repeat a strong verse. If there is a real point to be made and one verse does it particularly well, why not sing it twice? After all, we are trying to convey meaning with the words and few things work better than repetition for learning. The repetition might be the same verse sung back to back or once at the beginning and once at the end of a hymn, or any way you choose. For the same reasons, a whole hymn might be sung twice in the same service. An obvious example might be before and after a sermon with a closely related sermon in between.

Another approach that probably is labeled gimmickry by laymen and pastors alike is to have different groups within the congregation sing different verses. Males vs. females or left side vs. right side are common splits. At first glance, this looks only like a gimmick, but look what it could accomplish if practiced diligently. Take males vs. females, for instance. The main reason people resist this is because they feel awkward singing about their Savior; just as they feel awkward talking about Him. But, singing in the church setting is easier than talking

one-on-one, and if independent singing with your wife or kids or neighbors listening can be mastered comfortably, than talking about one's beliefs and one's Lord will be a step closer. A second benefit is that the "silent" group should be following along with the words as the others sing. I find this makes it much easier to glean meaning from hymn verses. In Luther's day, it was common to alternate using choir, soloist, instrument and congregation.

Prayers

The format we use to talk to God can be a sensitive matter, but it also is an extremely important matter—again requiring empathy. Anytime someone else is praying to God *in my place*, I feel I need to be able to understand what they are saying. This is the New Testament and I don't need a mediator any longer; I can talk directly to God and I want to understand the prayer well enough to feel that *I* am speaking these words to God even though the pastor is mouthing them for me.

Understandability - As "I" talk to God in prayer, do "I" understand what I'm saying? I frequently have a tough time saying yes.

Time Available - As a prayer is spoken by a pastor in my stead, I only have seconds to comprehend it. Considering that I've probably never seen or heard this prayer before, that puts an extra burden on understandability. It also suggests that preprinting the prayer in the bulletin gives me a chance to study it both before and after the time the prayer is actually spoken for me.

Abstractness - It probably seems nice to talk to God in flowery abstract terms. Our hymnal and Sampler and prayer books are full of examples that seem to be written to impress God with our literary genius. But, I'm not as smart as God and not even as smart as the pastors who write these prayers. I only know how to talk to God in simple grade school terms like forgive me, help me, lead me, strengthen me, I'm sorry, etc., but I know He still listens to me.

Inflections and Pauses - Voice inflection and pauses would help me follow along and feel as if I was praying. The inflections help convey meaning and the pauses give me time to appreciate and understand what was said in the previous phrase.

"Routine" Prayers - The Lord's Prayer, table prayers, evening and morning prayers, might be classified as "routine" for lack of a better name. Unfortunately, they all too often become routine. It's all too easy to rattle off a prayer when our subconscious knows it better than we do. In our services, the Lord's Prayer and the creeds need special attention so they don't become routine. Reading responsively, explanations, change of pace, men or women only, are some of the tactics to help avoid vain repetition and "routineness".

Poems - I formerly had a bias against poetic prayers because they usually seemed more abstract to me. However, *if* they are clear and understandable and properly presented, they can be a beautiful addition to a service.

Sermons

This brief period out of a whole week is what most people judge a church and a pastor by. Thus, you can probably exert more influence and accomplish more in those 15-20 minutes than you can with 50-60 hours of work the rest of the week—IF there is adequate planning and preparation.

Result/Goal - The most important aspect of a sermon is what goal you wish to accomplish through that sermon. If there is no goal or result intended, there is no point in presenting a sermon. What do you, with the Grace of God, intend to achieve as a result of your next sermon?

Retention - With the goal set, a tougher question is how you intend to present the sermon so that it will be remembered beyond the presentation period. What will you use to trigger and remind the congregation of your message, hours, days, and weeks after the sermon? How will you get them to do what you want when they leave?

Perhaps the most flattering comment I've ever received was when a colleague explained a speech I'd given to a group we were both in. He'd remembered the goal and outline better than I had, but my memory isn't very good a year and a half after a presentation. All that I'd done to trigger the audience's memory is include a series of slides of an English Setter in action, and repeatedly used the phrase "bird-dogging" to get them to pursue projects through to completion. It took some extra effort to find someone with the slides, but it obviously paid off.

I realize your job isn't as easy. You generally can't incorporate slides in your sermon and you have to present 60-70 sermons a year. Understandably, some will be better than others and some will be retained longer than others. I remember from a trip to the West Coast 2½ years ago that the WELS pastor there had used an analogy to recipe ingredients, though I honestly have forgotten how he related it to God's Word. (That's probably my fault, not his.) My point is that he had triggered his message to a routine occurrence in the lives of most people, though this trigger favored women slightly. He was thinking ahead to what they would do when they leave.

Theme - Just another reminder that the entire service ought to have a theme and that the sermon obviously needs to match and support that theme.

Preparation - If a service and sermon are as important as I think they are, it takes a lot of preparation. Are you satisfied with the amount of preparation you put into your services?

Organization and Delivery - Even though a "sermon" has a special meaning to you and me, I view it basically as a speech and there is a wealth of resources available to improve speech making. One guide I learned through Toastmasters is the "ARIA" formula for speech organization.

A - Get their "A"ttention.

R - "R"elate your topic to the audience's situation.

I - Use examples to "I"llustrate your point.

A - Tell them what "A"ctions you expect (what will they do when they leave?).

Not only is ARIA (or other variations like AIDA) widely used, I think it is *The Best* approach available. I challenge you to show me a better one, because if there is one better I want to know about it so I can tell others to use it. I've seen even a novice speaker use ARIA effectively the very first time he tried it. I've used ARIA in this presentation and we're currently in Illustrations.

Title - There must be a million sermon titles that incorporate words like "Savior", "Love", "Grace", "Cross", "Blessed", "Salvation", "Jesus". Generally speaking, these beautiful words fit better in the illustrations or action portion of a sermon. Titles are more effective if they are triggers like "recipes" or "bird-dogging". If you can get them to recall a title a week or two later, and if the sermon was properly constructed, they'll probably remember your message. I'm using "What will they do when they leave?"

Text - The same thoughts discussed with readings, Psalms, texts, and creeds earlier apply here.

Length - Quality of a sermon is seldom proportioned to its length. Rather, quality is proportional to the preparation effort. I've heard many excellent speeches within the Toastmaster guidelines of 5-7 minutes. My only message here is that a good sermon might vary in length

from 5 to 20 minutes. You may wish to use that option to incorporate special events in your service such as an extra hymn, a children's mini-service, a video or film presentation, a mini-Bible class, etc. Your congregation may well remember a particular sermon by its brevity.

Action

Don't you dare try all these things at once! You know better than I how delicately "change" must be handled, even when objections to change have no doctrinal basis. But, on the other hand, there are several things you can do in your preparation time that only you will be aware of. And, there can be subtle additions to a service that seem to be accepted virtually without notice.

These can be done independently at your will if you feel they have merit:

The "Worship Service Planning Guide" isn't patented nor is it necessarily optimized. Try it and pass on comments to Pastor Martin Baur, St. Paul's, Wisconsin Rapids.

Try the single theme approach in organizing the service. You don't have to announce a theme.

If appropriate, take more time in planning services.

Consider setting goals for what you think you and the Holy Spirit can accomplish together in a given service.

Try a little flexibility in the pericope or series you're using, particularly when the various service elements don't seem to be intertwined.

Even if you think you're a profound speaker, consider evaluating other delivery and organizational formats for your sermons.

Simplify prayers and "try them out" on family or school classes to see how well they're understood.

As I heard in a relaxation tape my wife had, use the back of your forehead as a billboard. Try writing "EMPATHY" there and looking up often.

Please read through all verses of the hymns you ask the congregation to sing.

Things that may or may not be noticeable to the congregation include:

Introductions and/or explanations of readings. This is not uncommon within WELS and adds greatly to understanding. Work into these gradually as you perceive necessary.

Introduction of a "Theme" is a little out of the ordinary, but try it first for a special service where it is obviously appropriate.

Try the concept of verse selection for hymns beyond the scope of the "first four" or the "first six". Be sure to make clear, explicit announcements regarding what you're doing, as this can be a downfall.

Try the concept of verse skipping in readings when a few verses tend to diverge from the message you're trying to convey, being careful not to alter meaning.

Consider sermon length as a viable option when trying to incorporate other special events or messages into a particular service.

Share freely the special services and special effects you develop with the district worship group or anyone else.

Please give me any feedback regarding service innovations you've tried.

Consider a "Toastmasters" type club composed exclusively of WELS pastors in various regions. Help each other to grow and improve by evaluating each other in a Christian way.

I pray *today* that the Holy Spirit will work in you and through you to try *one* improvement in your services. Over the next couple of years, I'll be asking God to help you with more, so stay tuned to His station of worship services?