

Michael T. Novotny
Senior Church History Project
Prof. Korthals
October 12, 2006

John Parlow: Motivation for Ministry

Every pastor has stories to tell, but not many have stories like this. After all, how many servants in God's Church have been shot at, stabbed, mugged, spit upon, rebuked by a demon-possessed man, and threatened with their own death and the death of their children? What seems too incredible to be true is the real life story of Pastor John Parlow. How have these experiences shaped his ministry? What people, events, and struggles have led him to carry out the Lord's work in the unique way that he does? An interview conducted in August of 2006 found the answers to these questions. John Parlow's life story molds the man and motivates his ministry. His grace-filled years on this earth have led him to focus on two key points as he serves in the Lord's Church: Be relevant. Be practical.

Although his ministry wouldn't begin for three decades, John Parlow's childhood played a vital role in his approach to serving the Lord. From early on, he developed a love for souls, even in controversial situations. His childhood church, which battled against tongue-speaking parishioners, was surprisingly minority-free considering the racial makeup of the county. Seeing the sharp distinction between the ethnic background of those he worshiped with and those he played football with, John was concerned and wondered why no one seemed to reach out to "those people." His love for souls of every color urged him to "see people by people."

This "controversial" love didn't just happen outside the walls of the Parlow household. Life inside was worthy of a modern day reality show and provided him with challenging opportunities to let his light shine. The Parlows, a family of means (gardener and maid included), consisted of an Olympic ice skater, a rock musician, a star quarterback, and a cocaine dealer. In fact, John shared the time when he had his own brother excommunicated and incarcerated for dealing drugs. Even at a young age, both his toughness and deep concern for others was evident.

When his quest to play football and "not lose his girlfriend" took him through the WELS' worker training system, John Parlow began to gravitate towards the ideas of relevance and practicality. He especially looked back fondly on the influence of Professor Wayne Mueller and Professor David Valleskey, both of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The ability to "take God's truth and make it practical" was a strength of Professor Mueller's and has impacted John throughout his life and ministry. "Valleskey's passion for the lost" also struck a chord within the man who had grown up amidst a "lost" peer group of mixed races.

Looking back over his years as a student in Lutheran schools, Parlow had both praise and concern for WELS worker training. His respect for our systematic explanations can't be understated. Having frequently asked others, "Why do you believe that?" John appreciates the dogmatics courses, which plainly lay out why we believe what we believe. However, his desire to always be practical appears to be the basis for his criticism of the current homiletics curriculum at the Seminary. The style and lack of variety, according to John, are turning off "80% of listeners." He recounted the various approaches encouraged at other seminaries he has

attended in his continuing education and urged his alma mater to think of relevance in sermon structure and content. "People assume that you're going to preach God's truth. They just want to know what it means tomorrow."

However, relevant preaching and practical applications couldn't save John Parlow from bearing his own cross in ministry. After call day took him to South Dakota, he accepted a call to serve in Baraboo, WI at the same church where he spent his vicar year. He knew that the life of a pastor was full of challenges, but he didn't anticipate having to confront his associate with a ministry-ending sin and address the 600-700 Elks' Lodge members that also were members of his church. Controversy always seems bigger in a small town and this was no exception. As the young new pastor who was "tearing this community apart," John was flicked off, spit upon, and received bomb/death threats at his home. Yet he always knew that a love for souls is equal to a love for the Word of God. It was a moment when he was forced to ask himself, "Do you really want to be faithful or do you really want to be popular" because you can't be both. When the dust had settled, nearly 500 members had left the church and, according to then District President Karl Gurgel, Parlow had gotten twenty-five years of experience in only five years. A call soon came that would bring John to Green Bay, but he had made his mark as both a tough and loving pastor in central Wisconsin.

No one could withstand what John Parlow withstood without the support and motivation of the Scriptures. Jesus words "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you" were the rock that he needed when the spit was flying in his direction. They also were his fortress when the Satanists were calling. During his years at he had the opportunity to do campus ministry and often ran into problems with the occult. On one occasion a demon-possessed man (or, at least, demon-oppressed) confronted John with a sin he had committed over two decades previously! The voices that filled the room when the man spoke in his own distorted tone drove the young pastor to the refuge of Jesus' promise. The same could be said when a group of devil-worshippers, angry at his anti-occult lectures, called to inform him, "We're staring at him (your newborn son) in the hospital." Yet all the threats and intimidation of Satan's followers couldn't stand up to the support that the Son of God provided.

In regards to carrying out his ministry, Pastor Parlow is quick to point to 1 Corinthians 9, a famous section on the love and freedom that every Christian puts to use as he reaches souls for Christ. Parlow remarked, "You don't change the message, but if you really love people, you have to be willing to examine what you are doing." His concerns about relevance are evident as he spoke of our approach to our unbelieving neighbors. If anything is changeable (short of sin) and will help me reach another individual with the gospel of Jesus Christ, I ought to change. This thought circled through much of this interview, especially in regards to the current state of young pastors in the WELS.

Nearly halfway through the interview, talk shifted to the factors in the present day and age that are motivating John Parlow to his unique ministry. A well-read man in terms of modern culture (and many other things, as his bookshelves prove), John commented on the younger generations' desire for relevance in worship. Echoing some of his feelings on worker training, he pointed out, "Our culture is spiritually searching" and it wants to know, "How does truth impact my life?" Pastor Parlow's desire to make every sermon relevant couldn't be missed as he described the shifts in our diverse society.

Yet, few people in the WELS recognize John Parlow for his work in Baraboo or his fruitful years in Brookings, South Dakota. Most have heard of the ministry that he is carrying out at St. Mark Lutheran Church in Green Bay/DePere, WI. What is so unique about his role as

senior pastor there? John once again pointed to his twin towers of relevance and practicality. St. Mark's outreach emphasis in worship ("Everything is geared for the first-time visitor") is evident throughout the service. Two giant screens on either side of the chancel make participation easy for newcomers. A question and answer session on non-Communion Sundays provides Scripture-based responses to the stickier questions in people's lives and assures the community that this church has nothing to hide. Participation during the service, sermon, and songs builds cognitive retention among those who participate. Even the style of worship is meant to be practical. The reverence and celebration seen at St. Mark generates an excitement and motivates some to say, "This would be a church I'd be willing to bring my unchurched friend to." If outreach is Parlow's mission, then comments such as these would lead one to say, "Mission accomplished."

Although this approach to ministry has ruffled a few Wisconsin Synod feathers, it can never be said that John Parlow doesn't love souls. In fact, it's the doctrine of hell that provides part of the push for what he does. The simple truth is that without Christ people go to hell. "If you as a pastor realize that, you're going to look at your ministry differently," asserts Parlow. The status quo is not good enough for those who love the souls who are on the fast track to hell. They should be willing to change approaches in worship and sermons to be relevant to all generations, especially the most recent ones that lack a solid church background. Those who are not willing to swim against the current of traditional Lutheranism drew the emotions out of this pastor. His strong words about some WELS members betrayed both his concern for souls and his self-confessed "lack of patience." Certain lifelong "WELSers" carry the baggage of entitlement and don't transfer their love for Jesus into the love for the souls he came to save. "I hate our bumper sticker!" Parlow exclaims. Come to the WELS? "I'd rather have us go to people." And it can surely be said that John wants to meet people where they're at with the things that they like to do. Anything less, he claims, is a lack of love for precious souls.

A love for souls of every race, age, and financial background has evidently shaped the past years of John Parlow's ministry and judging by his plans for the future, that won't change. His list of present and planned arms of ministry was both impressive and overwhelming. From ministry to sick and aging to a "lemon ministry" that repairs autos for financially challenged families, the St. Mark family has enough irons in the fire to make a seminarian blush. Plans for two giant editions onto the present DePere facility aim at educating children. The surreal descriptions of rooms that look like Noah's ark and hallways that resemble 1st century Jerusalem made the point that Parlow wished to make: We are serious about educating your children! Are these drastic changes, even for current members of a "cutting edge" church? Definitely. But, as John said, "Christianity is about being changed." The radical soul-transformation the gospel brings teaches Christians about both love and willingness to sacrifice for others.

As this interview came to a close Pastor John Parlow left some final advice for young men who are approaching their own call into full time service in the ministry. His words were a fitting summary of the eighty minutes recorded on an August morning. They point to his love for the Word, his love for souls, and his insistence on the freedom every pastor has in his approach to ministry. He boldly stated, "Base every area of your ministry on God's Word and not what people tell you." Be practical and let your love be known to all. After all, "Jesus' death matters and so does theirs."