

# The Circuit Pastor as the Pastor's Pastor

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By the abundant grace of God the Wisconsin Synod has been blessed with good pastors. Our pastors are shepherds who, believing themselves accountable for God's flock placed in their care, work diligently to tend, feed and protect their flocks. Our Shepherds have a care for their flocks, rather than just for themselves. (cf. Ezekiel 34.)

The concern of the circuit pastor in our synod is that good pastors remain good pastors and, if possible, become even better pastors. To that end the circuit pastor is minded to anticipate and, where possible, correct problems before good pastorates are weakened or placed at risk.

The faithful C.P. works incessantly to establish and retain good will and rapport with the pastors of his circuit. These efforts will vary in approach since he deals with a variety of personalities. Differing approaches will also be dictated by the fact that Synod finds itself working in a widely differentiated geographic and cultural mix. Friendly contact, while essential, is of course not an end in itself. It paves the way for serious discussion concerning the Lord's ways and the Lord's work. And (God forbid!) should trouble, even serious trouble, impact upon a brother's personal or professional life, that pastor will know that he has an approachable circuit pastor.

That, in brief, is a partial theory of why the WELS requires pastors for its pastors. Further details outlining some of the functions of the Pastor's Pastor can be found on pp. 20-22 in *The Handbook for Circuit Pastors, Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod*.

But, is procedural know-how, synodical loyalty, the best of intentions, unstinting effort, etc. on the part of the C.P. a guarantee for effective C.P. practice?

Something more is required. It is the thesis of this presentation that lacking this "something," the office of C.P. will have little impact in the building of Christ's Kingdom through our Synod. The "something" we lay before you is called *credibility*. It is essential that the pastors we serve see us their C.P.'s as real persons, person/pastors who can admit to their *Angst* and *Anfechtung*. We must be perceived as pastors who have been in the battles—having won some engagements, having lost some. What our men really need to know, is that we are *still* fighting—and ultimately, winning the war. To put the thought in its most obvious form, to be a good pastor's pastor, we must be good pastors.

And this—who can say how long it takes—builds *confidence* in the office of C.P. in the minds of our pastors. Confidence will not automatically be placed in us as we assume the office of a worthy predecessor. Confidence must be earned and kept on stream as we properly act and react to the labyrinth of pitfalls which confront the Christian pastor in 20<sup>th</sup> century North America. (Note: You might prefer hearing only about the positive challenges of the ministry which, when successfully met, build confidence in the C.P. office. While I might prefer speaking only on that aspect of the subject, it would not, in my opinion, be realistic or helpful.)

Explore with me therefore what I consider to be some of the hazards facing our own personal pastoral ministries. While each of you will have your own list of pitfalls, I trust the one offered here will basically coincide with your own index. It was developed in part from articles in the periodicals, *Issues...In Christian Education*, Fall 1975, Volume 10, Number 1 and, *Called to Serve*, Winter, 1984.

## 1. Discontent with our Calling

“For I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” Phil. 4:11. These words were spoken by St. Paul, a man who had experienced a variety of parish ministry activities. The initial success of some of his missionary activity was minimal. His “exploratories” didn’t always net good stats and sometimes were met by verbal and physical abuse. Yet, St. Paul was a contented man!

Circuit pastors need to be seen as pastors who are content in that particular calling into which the Holy Spirit has placed them. (cf. Acts 20:28.) Experience should teach us that our particular gifts, applied to special needs at specific times, benefit the Kingdom. And that should make us content. As we C.P.’s find our contentment we can better advise the young pastor who is revealing his suspicions that the Holy Spirit may have been out of the room when the Candidate was assigned his first call. We can also help the man who is developing self-doubts when no calls have come after five years out in the ministry and he sees his classmates receiving and returning calls. We might even have the right word for the “over fifties” who won’t be expecting too many more calls.

## **2. Community Involvement**

“He must be hospitable, one who loves what is good” Titus 1:8. On occasion we pastors (who become known in our communities) might become involved in community betterment projects, activities which have no direct relation to our role as pastor. When (if) we volunteer, care must be exercised so that we do not find ourselves in situations that could compromise our ministries.

## **3. Brothers We Offend**

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you” Matt. 18:15. If the local congregation is a spiritual hospital for the healing of sinners, so is the greater congregation, the synod. Occasionally the church’s leadership (that includes the C.P.’s) must deal with each other’s sin. How we proceed in these matters may be observed by the men in the circuit. They may have legitimate questions. They may require assurances that evangelical discipline is being practiced in all sectors of the Synod. Again, men of the circuit may seek our advice regarding difficult discipline cases in their own congregation. Great care must be exercised on the part of the C.P. to retain fairness and objectivity when offering advice. To retain credibility we will need to stay “on top” of the cases that keep developing in our own congregation(s), scrupulously avoiding the extreme of legalism or temporizing.

## **4. Coping with Stress**

“Cast all your anxiety upon him, because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). Severe depression and other stress related physical and/or psychological problems can seriously damage a pastor who is unable to draw that fine line between what we might term “objective empathy” and “subjective sympathy” while counseling with parishioners. We, who are probably still teaching ourselves to “cast...care upon Him,” that is, leave the problem with God at the office or study, need to keep our antenna up for the less experienced pastor who has boxed himself into a 24-hour, 7-day a week worry binge over a parishioner’s problem. No one can live that way for very long, including pastors. Each pastor needs to work out his own method for relieving his consciousness from the people-problems which daily face him. Our own success in this area will prove reassuring to the pastor having trouble coping with stress.

## **5. The Pitfalls of Leadership**

“Guard ourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the Church of God which he bought with his own blood” Acts 20:28. “...not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” 1 Peter 5:3. Being leader of any grouping of fellow humans has built-in pitfalls. The pastor/congregation relationship is no exception. We have seen and possibly also experienced the excesses endemic to leadership: “I’m the leader, which means I should be doing almost everything around the parish—that is, everything important.” “If this job is ever going to get done, I’d better do it.” “What I say goes ...uh, only in spiritual matters of course!” Not that we pastors ever really say these things, at least not in public. None the less, these thoughts do kick around in our subconscious. Part of the problem may be that the priesthood of believers is not being encouraged to function to its full potential. Also, the pastor may not have clearly defined his role as pastor and thus is insecure in the pastoral ministry.

Related problems have to do with the flock’s expectations of their pastor as administrator. Congregations can expect too much of their pastor in this area. Pastors can do too much. My belief is that congregations should be doing more administrative work, thus freeing up the pastor for more effective public administration of The Keys—not typewriter keys, but the Office of The Keys.

Furthermore, our pastors need on the job guidance so as to develop into good general practitioners with the savvy to be helpful in all areas of pastoral ministry. The pastor who becomes expert in the arcane may be impressive, but how practical is he? It’s not too helpful to the lay people for their pastor to be knowledgeable regarding the origins of transubstantiation but, find him unable to give cogent arguments for close communion.

## **5. Clergy Burn-Out**

“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” Mark 6:31b. A ministry that is coming apart at the seams presents a complex problem which requires much understanding and patience on the part of the C.P. dealing with the case. Medical help is sometimes required. Recognizing the signs of potential breakdown is important so that, if possible, we can advise before matters get out of hand. In this area I would suggest the C.P. must know his limitations.

Personally, I like to practice preventative medicine in my own ministry and strongly recommend the same for pastors in my circuit. After observing how gung-ho vicars will travel like jets for the first six months of their vicarage and then become gliders the last six months, vicars at St.Paul, Ottawa, are now required to take off one full day each week. A day a week away from any and all reminders of the work is time well invested. You return to the tasks at hand and are amazed how that Everest you left behind has been reduced to a very manageable foothill. Of course it never was a mountain in the first place. Tension and fatigue just gave it that appearance. Candidates (three are entering my circuit this summer) are non-plussed when the first thing they hear from the C.P. is not “Be sure to make a lot of mission calls,” or “set up your reading schedule” but rather, “let your flock know that \_\_\_day is the day you re-create yourself.” Those new pastors who think this C.P. is just being facetious and hence are always available for every telephone call and parish detail seven days a week become prospective burnouts.

Behind the, “I can never find a day to take off” syndrome there is, I suspect, some poor theology. Where in the Bible does it say that every problem must be solved by next Tuesday at

11:00 a.m.? The Word properly divided, and the Sacraments properly dispensed, are “doing their thing” even when we aren’t.

Walter M. Schoedel in the Fall 1975 issue of *Issues...in Christian Education* lists *Ten Commandments for a vibrant ministry*. For what value they might have in keeping ministries from getting into a burnout situation, we list them here:

1. Mix with a variety of people in an informal way.
2. Talk with some of the young energetic men in the ministry or for that matter, the people in other professions.
3. Chat with the young people of the congregation to discover what they might suggest as remedies for some of the perplexing problems of the church.
4. Go away for a few days.
5. Take time off regularly.
6. Read and don’t limit yourself to theological or religious books.
7. Attend Seminars and return to the Seminary for a summer session.
8. Do something which you do not have to do. Sometimes this becomes a stimulus to overcome boredom.
9. Change your pace and embark upon a new venture in your ministry.
10. Reevaluate frequently your goals and priorities.

## **6. Realistic Expectations for our Ministries**

“I will build my church” Matt. 16:18. Vicars and candidates and perhaps more experienced pastors sometimes have difficulty with the fact that the world is not waiting with baited breath and open arms to receive Lutheran theology and practice. They seem to want to plant, water, and then harvest spiritual fruit well before the time. They must learn that it is “God who makes things grow” (1 Cor.3:7). Without dampening enthusiasm we must indicate that the Holy Spirit “works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel” (A.C., Art.V). The G.B.H.M., evangelism committees have their plans and projections (as they should), but it is still Christ who builds His church as He wills.

## **7. Dissatisfaction With Living Conditions**

“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” Phil.4:11. “Be content with your pay” Luke 3:14. St. Paul knew what it was to be in need and he knew what it was to have plenty. He had “learned the secret of being content in any and every situation” (Phil. 4:12). The secret of Paul’s contentment of course was “Him” who gave him strength.

In a society where success is often measured in terms of high and ever higher salaries, the Lord’s servants must constantly relearn the meaning of 1 Timothy 6:8, “if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.” As we C.P.’s learn and relearn the “secret” of contentment, pastors in the circuit will also better understand that not receiving the salary of a doctor or a lawyer, while having an equivalent education, is not all that important. There are exceptions, but by and large the congregations of our Synod take adequate care of their pastors, teachers, professors and staff members.

Discontentment over wages is a major social malaise of our times. We who are to be “an example for the believers” should not become engrossed in “the love of money.” Pastors may hesitate to come to a C.P. who appears preoccupied about personal money matters.

Related to the above, is a possible problem for C.P.’s with most of their ministry behind them: becoming too involved in retirement planning and thinking. Retirement planning is

essential of course, but it dare not be allowed to impact upon an active, heads-up ministry. Any impression that the circuit has a “lame duck” for its C.P. should be avoided.

### **8. Problems Related To The “Sexual Revolution”**

“How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?” Gen. 39:9. A pastor (not of our Synod) confided in me recently, “I’ve got people in my congregation who believe anything goes.” Joseph Fletcher occasionally visits all of our congregations. We find ourselves counseling male and female homosexuals, people “living together,” spouses whose marriages are cracking up, etc.

Perhaps we can benefit from a statement by Professor William G. Hauser (“Why Pastors Leave the Ministry.” *Called to Serve*, Winter 1984) who writes:

“Nor dare I conclude that it is only the woman tempting the pastor. The reverse is too often the case. Adultery, unfaithfulness and divorce strike down too many a man of the cloth. Such an affair is all too easy to enter into because of the nature of his close association with the opposite sex in most of the phases of his work. The pastor as the counselor is an illustration: in the counseling process, a woman who has been the victim of a cruel, unbelieving or indifferent husband can quite easily and unintentionally turn her affections and desires to the understanding and gentle clergyman. The nature of her problem might require several listening and directive sessions. The relationship becomes close. Thus, too many good and meaningful pastors have been trapped by fornication.”

Maintaining God’s standards as summarized in the sixth commandment does not grow easier in a society that no longer knows how to blush. Furthermore, “oppositions of science falsely so called” (1 Tim.6:20, KJV). promote the idea that sexually aberrant behavior is congenital—and therefore legitimate.

Also, under sins that can fell pastors, we should not forget alcohol and drug abuse. While we personally may be unaware of any problems in this area, it is not impossible that a frustrated, self-defeated pastor might seek reprieve in alcohol and consequently develop a dependency. Needless to say, good C.P. example is important also in this area.

### **The Other Side of the Coin**

Being a circuit pastor resembles running the high hurdles. As we all know there is more to running the hurdles than just clearing them and not stumbling into the cinders. It is essential to *stay* in the race, finish the course, and hopefully place. Likewise, successfully avoiding pastoral pitfalls by no means makes us good circuit pastors.

The pastors of your circuit require a C.P. who functions as a role model of the evangelical Christian pastor. The C.P. “must be blameless, the husband of one wife, not drinking too much wine, a man of good judgment and fine behavior, kind to guests, able to teach, no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not one who loves money. He should manage his own family well and have his children obey him as he treats them very seriously. If anyone doesn’t know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s Church?” (1 Timothy 3:2-7 Beck).

To be accepted by our circuits in any meaningful sense requires of us that we be and remain Evangelical Lutheran pastors, first and last.

References in the Book of Concord under the headings of Preacher, Teacher, bishop, etc. are helpful in understanding the Lutheran pastorate. Allow me to share just a few gems from the Lutheran Confessions which apply to C.P.ing.

“Dissensions also arise when the people judge their clergy’s behavior too strictly or despise them because of some minor fault and then seek after some other kinds of doctrine and other clergy” (The Book of Concord, Tappert Edition. 140. 233).

“Wherever there are godly preachers and christians, they must endure having the world call them heretics, apostates, even seditious and accursed scoundrels” (400. 262).

“maintain ‘a sharp distinction’ between needless...contentions and necessary controversy” (506. 15).

“It is good to extol the ministry of the Word with every possible kind of praise in opposition to the fanatics” (212. 12).

“The N.T. requires sacrifices of the heart” (256. 34).

“But Christ himself will be our reward if we labor faithfully” (341. 27).

“in this life many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled with believers” (33. 1).

“The Word which is heard and preached is an office and work of the Holy Spirit whereby he assuredly is potent and active in our hearts” (532. 56).

“essential...to present...doctrine correctly, also to accuse...those who teach otherwise” (506. 14).

“The ministry of the Word has God’s command and glorious promises: Romans 1:16, Isaiah 55:11” (212. 11).

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the pastors that make up our circuits should have the reasonable expectation that their circuit pastor is working hard at making at least 500 pastoral calls a year, reading, preaching, teaching, counseling, at the same time not forgetting administration, stewardship and evangelism.

Let us keep on working to be the best pastors we possibly can be. In that way we will also grow to maturity as Pastor’s Pastors.