

# Outreach That Any Congregation Calling Itself 'Evangelical Lutheran' Will Do.

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In an effort to clarify something that was written – and to be at peace with his own ministry (and, I presume, his conscience) – one pastor questioned another: “Do you think I am being unfaithful in ministry if the extent of my ‘outreach’ is preaching the gospel to visitors who come to worship?” By his own admission, he and his church had neither an active evangelism committee nor any planned outreach activities. Behind his question was an acknowledgement that *some* outreach should be done. By his question he was asking for a second opinion as to whether he was doing *enough*.

The title assigned for this practical paper is, “*Outreach That Any Congregation Calling Itself ‘Evangelical Lutheran’ Will Do.*” One could rephrase the title in this way, “If you are an Evangelical Lutheran then you will – *at the very least* – strive to do these things in your congregation to fulfill our Savior’s mission directives.” Immediately, we see a caution sign. God’s gospel-focused mission is clear in the Bible, so we all make efforts to strike a balance in our congregation’s nurture and outreach activities. Still, no one is at liberty to set up an “11th Commandment.” Who is qualified to tell a brother in the ministry that they *must* do these specific mission activities lest they sin? No one can say, “At a minimum, follow these simple steps in your evangelism work or you are being unfaithful in your ministry and you should forfeit your confessional title as an Evangelical Lutheran.” Accordingly, the goal of this paper is not to offer this type of an evangelism checklist.

The coordinators for our Institute on Worship and Outreach (IWO) addressed this very issue. As a “think tank” of WELS pastors, designed to study and pull from personal experiences to encourage excellence in worship and outreach, they made this point clear. Any practical outreach thoughts should be shared “*not in a legalistic sense, but from the vantage point of common sense and loving encouragement.*” They had hoped I would draw from evangelism lessons I’ve learned over the years... and some mistakes made. They had hoped I could offer basic outreach reminders. That “*any Evangelical Lutheran might do them*” suggests some very simple mission thoughts.

To be fair – while we avoid “evangelism rules” – Evangelical Lutherans welcome suggestions, encouragements and loving criticisms. Knowing we are sinful, our new life in Christ appreciates all the help it can get in Christian service... including new ministry ideas, gentle reminders and even loving accountability. Accept these thoughts, then, as simple observations on outreach from a brother in the ministry. Accept these thoughts as things for *every* WELS parish pastor and his leadership to at least consider – not just for those who are gifted in evangelism, excel in mission activity, or who find their church located in growing parts of the country. What simple mission-minded foundation might any Evangelical Lutheran pastor lay for himself and for his people?

We call ourselves “Evangelical Lutherans.” In our circles the terms “evangelical” and “reformed” are often interchangeable – so maybe it’s wise that we clarify. Our use of the phrase

“Evangelical Lutheran” is to be understood in the simplest way possible. In the WELS, it appears as a part of a church’s full name and is present whenever we see or use our Synod’s acronym, “WELS.” Explained more clearly,

*At the first level, the terms Lutheran and Evangelical seem to be almost interchangeable. We confessional Lutherans regularly use “evangelical” as a part of our label – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church. To us “evangelical” means focused on the gospel. To us “Lutheran” also means focused on the gospel. The doctrine on which the church stands or falls is the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. The one great mission of the church is to share this message with the world... That is why we call ourselves “evangelical.” To be Lutheran and to be Evangelical is one and the same thing. [WLQ, Summer 2010, p. 163]*

In preparation for the 2007 Synod Convention, a committee of gifted pastors studied our mission statement and related Bible passages. They squeezed the oranges so thoroughly that the carafe is too large to serve here. But allow me to share some nourishing drips:

- God the Holy Spirit converts hearts and preserves and strengthens faith through his gospel;
- God has chosen to use us, his believing children, as his gospel-sharers;
- We gospel-sharers are not the converters but rather God’s instruments;
- In grateful response to God’s grace, we gospel-sharers take our instrumental role very seriously;
- On the one hand, we don’t want to reduce the life of a Christian to outreach only – we love, we serve, we share the gospel with the family of believers;
- And on the other hand we thankfully accept Jesus’ commission to take the gospel to the ends of the earth – proclaiming it in the communities of the world where we live and supporting the world-wide scope as best as we can;
- Let’s not lose our gospel-focus – let’s lovingly encourage Christians to both share the gospel and support mission work – all to God’s glory!

[Matthew 28:19 and the Mission of the WELS, 4/2007]

The Holy Spirit has warmed our hearts with the message of Jesus, our Savior from sin. This message is good to hear. Jesus wants us to ponder it. Jesus asks us to be his instruments and share it. We Evangelical Lutherans are only too thankful and happy to accommodate him.

### **The Holy Spirit Blesses the Humble, Repentant Attitudes of Evangelical Lutherans**

The Holy Spirit blesses those who plan all aspects of his gospel work and then put those plans into action. The Holy Spirit also blesses simple Christ-like attitudes followed by simple, common sense acts of love. For starters, we Evangelical Lutherans need to bow regularly before the cross of Jesus. Maybe I can explain it best by looking in the mirror.

The words of my confession roll off my tongue with ease. They are fluent and polished: “...I confess that I am by nature sinful,... I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good...

*in countless ways I have sinned against you... Lord, have mercy on me... cleanse me from my sin, and take away my guilt."*

The first question I need to regularly ask myself as a WELS pastor, "Does my attitude in daily ministry match my confessions of sin?" It's a penetrating question that I ask for a reason. I have received a rich heritage passed down to me from my church body. The Holy Spirit has blessed me through my Synod's training schools. A growing number of Christian churches today have pastors who make their confessional stand on "God is love and love is tolerance." But as "itching ears turn away from the truth" – by comparison, I know my doctrine well. When I am called upon by my members, and regularly by the "other church" or unchurched, to explain and defend it, comments are frequently made, "WELS pastors really know their stuff." My sinful pride sips on the wine. What is more, my role as a shepherd includes being a leader. People come to me for an assortment of advice and opinions. Questions on issues of Christian freedom and matters of unchanging doctrine fill up my voicemail and email inboxes. I respond. People thank me. Arrogance takes another swig.

Suddenly it's time for me to *take advice* and learn *from others*. Suddenly I am asked to analyze my activity to see where *I might improve*:

- A pastor much younger than I am is presenting a conference paper on improving my Christian education techniques;
- A mission board is holding an evangelism workshop in hopes of encouraging increased outreach activity in my ministry;
- A circuit pastor is suggesting that monthly meetings be devoted to evaluate preaching, including mine;
- A district president strongly encourages me to consider continuing education for personal, spiritual growth...

The question I need to ask myself: "Is my pride too drunk to listen?" I am naïve to think that I can't fall victim to Satan's traps. Yes, I am a WELS pastor. But my sinful nature is as susceptible to the sins of pride and arrogance as anyone else – and, as a Called leader, maybe more so. Please accept these words in the loving way they are intended. I sense that many (yes, to a degree all) WELS pastors share my struggle in this weakness. I know... because I've seen and heard their "breath-analyzers" too.

Some time ago, I was a part of an exercise at a pastors' conference. Members of the break-out group were asked to share parts of their evangelism plans. The resistance was notable. Some didn't have an evangelism committee. Others wanted to know why they needed to provide the information, who wanted it and how it would be used. In the larger discussion, many other pastors were defensive, frustrated – even angry. Or consider conversations where ministry ideas are shared with fellow pastors. I've seen pastors suggesting a different ministry approach who were cut off in mid-sentence by brothers who made it clear they weren't listening. In their minds, there was only one right way to do things. The topics being discussed involved applications – not principles. Minds were closed to topics where God has offered multiple options.

I'm ashamed to admit that at times I've done these same things. The sinful pride is alive and well – among Evangelical Lutherans too. The question we must ask, "Do our attitudes match what we so accurately confess?" When we pray, "*in countless ways I have sinned...*" our sins of pride and our failures as pastors help populate the list.

- We can always be better preachers – mine the text more faithfully and spend better time with appropriate, fresh applications;
- We can always improve our teaching and preparation;

- We can all be better stewards of our time – striking clearer balance between nurture and outreach in our gospel-focused ministries;
- We can all be better missionaries – both in our personal lives and as we lead and train our people;
- We can all be better husbands, fathers and role-models in our congregations –

In short – yes, we are sinful. No, we shouldn't find it so difficult to admit that we all have room for improvement in every area of our ministry. We willingly accept criticism and crave encouragement in all areas of our gospel work. It's a healthy exercise to regularly ask ourselves, "Why do I *do* this?" and "Why do I do it *this way*?" You have ideas for better preaching and teaching? – please, share. You have thoughts on how to bring more unbelievers in contact with the gospel? I'm all ears. You have suggestions on how to better manage my time and better organize my week? You saw my desk, didn't you?!

Evangelical Lutherans admit that our lives and ministries are riddled with sinful pride and unfaithfulness. We plead for the mercy of God. Our service to our Savior is a road littered with pot-holes, always "under construction"... our great comfort is the truth that our status before God is not! Our Savior's justifying work is perfect and complete. Our every sin has been paid for in full. Every unfaithful hour, every sloppy text study, every visit we put off – every sin is washed away in Jesus' blood. "*And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin*" (He. 10:18). We are robed in Jesus' holiness by faith. We are declared innocent in God's sight. Our Savior-God whispers his assurance to us, "*I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more*" (Is. 43:25). This is the peace we enjoy. This is what drives us to thankfully serve. This is the gospel we can't help but joyfully share.

We don't need to incorporate every idea we hear. In fact, that would be foolish. But we humbly and happily keep our minds open to how we might improve as gospel-sharers. Outreach that any congregation calling itself Evangelical Lutheran will do? It begins humbly and honestly at the cross of our Savior, with attitudes that mirror what we confess about our own sinful hearts... and about the amazing grace in Jesus'!

## **The Holy Spirit Blesses Simple, Common-sense Acts of Love from Evangelical Lutherans**

### *We keep the gospel visible*

When Synod leaders asked some of our brothers to help encourage us to "*strive for excellence in public worship and mission outreach*" – the initial IWO committee members brainstormed a list of presuppositions. Each one was a homerun. One excerpt reads, "*...it remains a truism that most seekers will measure our churches and receive first contact with our proclamation of the gospel in public worship.*" [The debate over whether corporate worship should be used as an outreach tool is not in-play here.] As stated, the reality is that starving, wandering sheep and unbelievers (regardless of why they came) will use the worship service as their first point of contact with a church. Also, for our purpose in *this* paper, no one is necessarily being asked to change their style of worship or their content. We Evangelical Lutherans will, however, want to constantly re-evaluate how we package the crown jewel of the gospel in worship.

An outfitter takes groups on horseback into the gorgeous western mountains for an afternoon of relaxing scenery. "*We'll fit your sit so you can glean the scene!*" The slogan is

simple, clear and accurate. People don't pay outfitters and go on riding trips to spend their time wrestling with stirrups that are too short or saddles that don't fit. God's mountain scenery and beautiful creation are the jewels. The vehicle must not distract. If Evangelical Lutherans understand anything – it's that in the gospel the Holy Spirit unleashes his power for the salvation of everyone who believes. Both for the life-long member and the first-time visitor... every single second in worship is a priceless moment. The order of worship, regardless of the style (historic, blended, contemporary), should be clear and easy to follow for everyone. Evangelical Lutherans want their “riders” to focus *on the gospel* in worship and not be distracted *from the gospel* because they need to fidget with the equipment.

One mission-minded encouragement is to print out the full order of service – every week – into an attractive, well-designed, easy-to-read bulletin. It's worth the extra expense in paper and toner if it means the worshiper won't be distracted. If worship screens are available they can be used effectively to this end. Care needs to be taken that technology is always a “servant” to the gospel and never a “serpent” against it. If a pastor and his leadership wrestle with these options and determine to continue using hymnal and bulletin – wouldn't the worship leader want to spend extra time clearly and carefully guiding the worshipers through the parts of the service? To this end, as a pastor prepares his notes to lead worship he will want to imagine he is talking to someone who has never before been in church or seen a hymnal. His comments and phraseology will get easier and become more polished each week. And when church members note the changes – it can also serve to educate them on our constant desire to help visitors focus on the gospel – specifically those who haven't heard it before. I've seen this done well. There are pastors who work at this and have perfected the art of a classy, easy-to-follow worship service with nice, loving explanations and transitions.

Last year I attended a WELS church whose service path took us worshipers on the route of a hymnal liturgy. It wasn't the order of service with which I took exception – I trusted the pastor knew his congregation, community and culture. It was the way the service was packaged that was so uncomfortable. We bounced back and forth from bulletin to book to bulletin to book and back again. We stood. We sat. We stood again. I needed a saddlebag to keep all my bulletin inserts together (and I'm not just saying that to make the illustration fit). But I was an experienced rider. I grew up on these trails (including when the worship leader began to jump ahead and cut out sections of the service). Somewhere along the path, however, my 18 year-old daughter fell off her horse. She whispered, “Dad, where are we?!” I don't know how long she was fidgeting with her saddle. But it was too long, because in her struggle to find her way back, she wasn't able to listen to the gospel. If a life-time, church-going, young woman was lost – what chance did visitors have?! How much of God's powerful Word did *they* miss? The price of getting lost in worship is just too high because of the gems they miss while they're gone. With the desktop publishing available today, it isn't too difficult to make a worship bulletin look classy, complete and stapled together in a booklet. Secretarial assistance can help so pastors don't play behind their computers longer than necessary. Once a template is set it too gets easier week to week. But again, regardless of the worship style we choose we always want the very best for our Savior and his blood-bought people.

Outreach that any congregation calling itself Evangelical Lutheran can do? It's nothing magical or radical. It's a simple, common sense act of love. Consider how lost an unbeliever might become in our worship services. Each pastor must consider his choice of music and hymns relative to his congregation and the musical talents available to enhance worship. But the physical path of worship should be a clear and comfortable ride such that God's Word is in full

view at all times. For many, smoothing out the bumps in the order of worship is yesterday's idea. For others, it would mean more of a change. For Evangelical Lutherans, it's something we want to consider to help all of our worshipers be constantly focused on the gospel.

*We live the gospel in our hospitality*

One area of outreach that continues to be a source of tension on the pastor's schedule and, perhaps, a source of insecurity in carrying it out is making a follow-up visit (say nothing of the "cold-call" or canvassing). The opening question in this paper reveals the discomfort that so many pastors feel about outreach visits. And it doesn't matter how many you make – it's a little like getting nervous before you preach – you never get over it or get rid of it – you just learn to cope with it.

But isn't following up on a visitor who came to my worship service, pared down to its bare essence, just another simple, common-sense action of Christian love? Isn't it a simple fruit of the Holy Spirit that he can bless?

I imagine my teenage son coming home from basketball practice. He brings along a teammate to study biology. He asks for permission to allow his friend to eat dinner with us. The visitor sits at my table. The visitor eats my food. The visitor spends 25 minutes with my family over dinner time. The visitor gets up with my son, excuses himself to return to study biology. I never make direct eye contact with him. I never introduce myself. I never welcome him. I never thank him for coming. Question: is this normal behavior?!? Let's not waste time on the obvious answer. Apply: a visitor comes to my church home. He dines with my church family. We *'taste and see that the Lord is good'* for an hour. The gospel is shared. He gets up to excuse himself with the rest of the family. My family huddles with one another while he walks out the door. I may or may not have shaken his hand in the informal line as the masses exited the church – depending on which way he went out. The point is... did I make direct eye contact with him? Did I formally introduce myself? Did I warmly welcome him to my house... to God's house? Did I ever thank him for coming and learn a bit about him? If not – is this acceptable behavior?

In view of God's mercy to us, he urges us to love one another and practice hospitality toward others (Ro. 12:13; 1 Pt. 4:9). So important is this Christian attribute that our Lord lists it as a qualification for a pastor (1 Tm. 3:2; Tt. 1:8). In other words, we pastors are to lead by example. We are the Sunday morning hosts. That's our Calling. When visitors come under our roof we want to be hospitable and welcome them. On the one hand, pastors have lost their ministries for not holding to certain overseer qualifications (husband of one wife, etc.) – so it's a serious matter. On the other hand, we don't want to over-state the application – but the point is fair. Evangelical Lutherans would see it not in terms of "what I must do" but in gospel-focused terms of "what I want to do for Jesus and his guests."

Every pastor, together with the assistance of his church family, has earned the right to follow up on visitors. They came to your house – you can go to theirs to thank them for stopping by. Maybe that's done in the lobby after church. When worship attendance gets too large and the number of regular visitors too great, the pastor may need to do so by visiting, mailing, and calling/emailing visitors who slipped out. Form letters/emails are OK. The more personal touch involved, the better. There's no hidden agenda. It's just common courtesy. "You stopped by our house yesterday. I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to formally meet you and thank you for coming. Let us know if we can serve you in any way. Please come again!"

Clearly, the larger the church the greater the challenge. With larger churches, “greeter” teams are trained and scheduled to cover the higher volume of people, both members and non-members. Lay teams begin to call on behalf of pastors. Secretaries begin to send out form letters/emails. In order to make it all happen, some type of retrieval system needs to be in place to capture contact information. [These things take care of themselves in time. And even then, in a perfect world, the pastors will still want to touch base with the first-time visitors, at least.]

Whatever the case – God blesses simple, Christian hospitality. Most churches, over time, slide into just doing their thing. That’s a nice way to say, “We all get selfish and lazy – a side-effect of our sinful nature.” Not a sin of commission, but a sin of omission perhaps. All pastors and members need constant reminders to be more gospel-focused. We all need a nudge to seek out worship-visitors and to be more hospitable. Most adult confirmands in growing churches have commented that among the top reasons they came back to church multiple times was that the people were so friendly... and/or the pastor personally took the time to call or email them. Is it a second hearing of the gospel? Is it some barrier broken down by a simple act of love? How the Holy Spirit blesses is up to him. But this much we know: God asks us to love one another and to be hospitable toward all; God promises pastors and people, “*Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it*” (Lk. 11:28).

The importance of a church’s warmth cannot be ignored... both for loving the family of faith and for outreach purposes. Before unchurched people come to worship for the right reasons, they rank the members’ friendliness high on the list as to whether they will return after their initial visit. We want outsiders to have as much airtime with the powerful gospel as possible. An important side-note to warmth, friendliness and hospitality in our churches stares the pastor in the face. Two age-old sayings ring true: 1.) “*As goes the shepherd... so go the sheep!*” 2.) “*In time, all churches take on the personality of their pastor!*” If lobbies (narthexes) around our Synod are cold and unfriendly, uncaring or unwelcoming... we pastors can run, but we can’t hide!

Outreach that any congregation calling itself Evangelical Lutheran will do? Thanking our visitors for coming to God’s house does not need to be some high-end, well-sophisticated evangelism program that requires a panel of trained experts. Neither is it some growth-gimmick. It’s just a classy, common sense act of love. Visitor follow-up is what everyone used to call ‘common courtesy’ or what God still calls Christian hospitality. A systematic series of visits with law/gospel witness presentations is a great goal to strive for... someday... when an Evangelism Committee is running on all cylinders. But there’s no shame in just a simple, post-worship contact: “Thanks for coming – come back again sometime – you’re always welcome here at God’s house.” Evangelical Lutherans might say, “It’s the least we can do!”

### *We teach the simple truths of gospel*

The preface to Luther’s Small Catechism tells us why he wrote it: “...so that all Christians might have a short and simple summary of the main truths that the Bible teaches.” (p. vii) The rest is history. Every WELS pastor is trained in the Bible’s doctrines and taught how to pass them on. Every WELS pastor knows Luther’s Catechism and uses it as his curriculum for young teen-agers prior to their confirmations. Most pastors have a set course they use. Prep time is manageable. The course simply gets plotted on the calendar every year – rain or shine. It takes priority in a pastor’s schedule and rightly so. Catechism class is something Evangelical Lutherans do well, regularly and with priority... after all, this is the gospel we are sharing.

So why don't we do the same thing for our adults? Initially, we're not talking about the unchurched, we're talking about our own membership. We cycle through the same Scripture readings in worship from year to year, including festivals and holidays. We don't say, "We're going a different direction for a while because everyone heard these when they were 13 years old." When stewardship plummets or worship attendance stagnates or our Councilmen forget half of the Ten Commandments we call for spiritual renewal. The answer is to lead God's wonderful people "back to the basics" of law and gospel. Essentially we re-package the simple but important catechetical truths and re-teach them. When does Catechism class ever stop?

Catechism class is for adults too. What if every pastor put the Adult Information Class (AIC or BIC) on their schedules with the same level of regularity and priority as youth confirmation? It never stops... it's an evening set aside for enriching time in the Catechism. Members are strongly encouraged, "If you haven't been to a BIC in a few years, please strongly consider attending!" Classy bulletin announcements are drawn up. Sign-up sheets are posted. Pastors do enough leg work in recruiting members so they know they'll have a core group. Members bring the cookies and brew the coffee. Every pastor has (or should have) a Catechism class for adults that they enjoy teaching. There are several from NPH – many other pastors teach their own. Over time the class can be enhanced with slides, hand-outs and/or music. This is a fun evening going back to the basics. Some of the richest class discussions I've ever had came from members in Adult Catechism class wrestling with questions they last heard as a teen-ager. This is what Evangelical Lutherans do well. This is spiritual renewal at its best... teaching the simple truths of God's Word... sharing the gospel.

If it's already on the schedule and happening, suddenly, it's a very short distance to use the AIC/BIC as an outreach tool. A wise veteran missionary gave me this advice during the exploratory years of my mission. Do not wait until you get some unchurched people before you plan to start a BIC. Rather, PLOT it on the calendar. PROMOTE it. PRAY for the Holy Spirit to use it as his tool and to bless it according to his good will and purposes (included in worship prayers too). When we wait for an interested unchurched person(s) before starting a BIC – it often results in long delays and cancellation. Consider what an obstacle it is for the pastor to schedule a class when he needs to unexpectedly carve out a weekly time for teaching. Also, it can be an obstacle for a leery, unchurched person to hear the gospel when they need to consider, "So let me get this straight – I'm going to sit in a pastor's office for 1.5 hours and he's going to tutor me for XX weeks?!?"

The approach to having an ongoing AIC/BIC pre-planned on our ministry calendar yields other blessings and opportunities. Consider how it holds pastors accountable. With a "we'll see as we go" approach – the adult confirmation class will inevitably fall off the calendar. The unchurched are silent while the urgencies of weekly ministry scream for our time. With the class scheduled – it forces priority and holds us accountable to some level of outreach activity. Or consider God's gifted people. Maybe a pastor isn't the most naturally gifted evangelist. But don't ever underestimate God's people. They often have a network of family or friends to whom they are trying to witness. Set them up for outreach success. An AIC/BIC is a tremendous tool and forum for natural friendship evangelism. And, they aren't encouraged to merely *send* their unchurched friends – but to *bring* them. Like Andrew and Peter, Philip and Nathanael – the body of Christ is functioning.

Plotting the adult confirmation class on the ministry calendar also helps us to trust God. We set the date. We invite members. We strongly encourage members to bring their acquaintances. We invite past worship visitors with a "try it before you buy it" approach. Giving



them a commitment-free trial to the class makes unchurched much more willing to attend. Maybe we even mass-mail attractive invites to our community. We pray for God to bless. How the Spirit moves hearts and blesses the class is his business. We consider it a privilege to be his gospel instruments and we know good things will happen when people are in his Word.

Some day it would be nice to see well-trained teams of WELS evangelists marching across America's neighborhoods and subdivisions, gathering names and sharing the gospel. It's happening in a few places and we rejoice. But God's outreach work is still being done when we prepare a simple catechetical meal and invite family and friends for refreshment. "*Faith comes from hearing the message*" (Ro. 10:17). With an AIC/BIC or two embedded into our annual ministry calendar – we share the gospel in a venue tailored for spiritual renewal for our members. We give God's people a chance to function as Christ's ambassadors as they bring family and friends. We teach the gospel through simple, catechetical truths – a strength of WELS pastors. The power of the Spirit is unleashed when the gospel is shared in this clear, simple way. This much all Evangelical Lutherans can do... it's what we are trained for... this is what we love to do!

*We treasure and support our gospel-focused team*

One of the greatest blessings we have in our gospel-focused ministries is the fellowship of our congregations and fellow Called workers. This is highlighted again and again when Christians from outside our fellowship join us by profession of faith or adult confirmation. Their outside perspective is worth noting. Our Synod keeps a unified and clear gospel focus in its training of Called workers. We have missions at home and abroad that are supported by our joint offerings. Our congregations are united. Journeying Christians seeking the truth hear what is taught in our worship services and, in time, learn that the same message is proclaimed from all the churches on our team. They are shocked, impressed and attracted. Praise God for these blessings.

Sadly, the saying about familiarity and contempt bleeds into the blessing of our fellowship too. Sometimes we fail to recognize the rich blessings of our unity and teamwork as a Synod. We can take it for granted. I liken it to blood brothers... best of friends who can, at times, quarrel like the worst of enemies. Maybe too many live too close. Maybe if every pastor and congregation lived in an isolated part of WELSdom, surrounded only by mountains, sage-brush and Mormons for 500 miles in every direction, we would better appreciate our unity. In truth – it comes down to trust, rejoicing and appreciation.

Evangelical Lutherans who are united in faith, trust one another. I trust my brothers in the WELS. Like me, they have been trained in the Word by the Word – all blessed by the Holy Spirit. They have been Called by God to serve in different communities as gospel-sharers to different cultures – ministering to a variety of Calling bodies. I can't begin to know how they wrestle with the unique challenges in their congregations and communities. I trust they understand our Savior's mission to preach and teach the gospel to those inside and outside their church's walls. I trust they grapple with balancing their ministries and family lives like I do. I trust they, like me, work to nurture and reach out with the gospel – doing one without leaving the other undone.

When I hear that a fellow pastor uses different worship styles than I do – I trust their use of Christian freedom and rejoice that they are sharing the gospel in a way they feel is best for their circumstances. When I hear that a fellow pastor is having a pumpkin-fest, a children's

carnival or some other unique gathering – I don't think for a second that he believes pumpkins are creating faith or that his cleverness can make the gospel more powerful. I know exactly what he's doing – he's being shrewd in dealing with his community's unbelievers so he can gather an audience. In time he will unleash the power of the gospel for the salvation of everyone who believes. I trust him. In the rare event that he gets a tad careless in his practices, I know he has a circuit pastor and a district president. I trust them too. And I trust that should these leaders offer loving cautions to a pastor/missionary that he would humbly take their cautions under advisement.

And all this is good – because it's not my place nor do I have time to write emails or erect websites or sit on the phone criticizing or accusing from a distance. I have been Called to farm my own 40 acres of ministry. If I have extra time to look over my fences, then I have time to make that outreach or inreach visit that I've been putting off for too long. If anything, I'm interested in the various ways that my brothers get the gospel out to the unchurched. Maybe I can learn something from them.

As I trust – I also rejoice. Good ministry is being done everywhere in our Synod – because the gospel is being proclaimed everywhere. Occasionally our leaders do statistical research among our districts. For instance, mission boards may want to know where God is growing his kingdom so they can be good stewards of grants and gifts given to Jesus to reach lost souls. There may be others who use these profiles. Sometimes these stats get tossed around, misquoted and misused. In time, stereotypes are formed and comments are made that do not rejoice in gospel blessings nor do they build up our Synod unity. Careless generalizations are often tossed around. “Salt-water districts are the only ones doing mission work” or “There's no mission work being done in the Midwest” or “The churches in the states of xxx are dying.” Pastors of larger congregations, perhaps with schools, get up early and work hard through a day of counseling, classes and meetings. Their schedules include frequent funerals as God's people are called home to glory. Amidst it all, they need to have a sermon ready for the weekend like everyone else. No good comes from brothers labeling these congregations' gospel work as “maintenance ministry” with a disparaging tone. Good ministry is being done in every district of our Synod – because the gospel is being proclaimed everywhere. Evangelical Lutherans rejoice in each other's faithful service and the Holy Spirit's gospel-fruits.

With that said, let's not kid ourselves. There are lazy pastors too. Weeks of time get wasted and “auto-pilot” becomes the gear of choice. Because lay-leaders usually have a high regard for the ministry, they assume the best and hesitate to hold their pastors accountable to ministry activity. It's been said that one of the best places for a lazy person to hide is in the pastoral ministry. When a brother questions or urges a sluggish pastor – the sinful pride gets defensive and the lazy become despondent. No district is exempt. And then... there are those mornings when I see the laziest pastor shaving in my bathroom mirror. Rather than assess one another – my fervent plea is that each of us assess ourselves:

- Honestly walk our sins of laziness and unfaithfulness to Jesus' cross and ask for his mercy and forgiveness;
- Lovingly erase stereotypes and generalizations that serve no good purpose and merely give the devil a foot-hold to divide our unified team;
- Thankfully consider how we all can add at least one gospel-focused activity to our daily or weekly calendars. Baby-steps are fine – one extra call, email or visit – help one more person come in contact with the gospel in whatever way we can.

Let's push ourselves a bit and give Jesus our best. Let's work a little harder today than we did yesterday because, "*Night is coming, when no one can work*" (Jn. 9:4).

We trust each other. We rejoice with one another's blessings. We challenge ourselves to increase our service to Jesus. Evangelical Lutherans also appreciate their team. Our Synod has some treasures we'd never want to be without. God has blessed us with a training in the gospel through a system of education that is coveted by others. No single church can accomplish what we are able to do together. And yet, every church benefits from a Called worker(s) in the preaching (teaching) ministry. How thankful we are to our brothers and sisters in the faith to have contributed so generously so our pastors (teachers) can proclaim the gospel to us. Likewise, if we add staff or need to replace our current staff, we trust there will be a well-trained worker waiting to graduate or available from the field. Neither exist without cost to the team. Furthermore, in love for Jesus we all have the privilege of supporting the wider-scope of gospel outreach to states and/or nations where we cannot physically go. Our Synod sends those missionaries on our behalf. There is other important gospel-focused work that our Synod does for our mutual benefit. All this training and sending costs money. For these reasons, Evangelical Lutheran churches generously support their team and their joint work in prayers and offerings.

When we consider outreach that any church can do – supporting the team must be on the list. There's no good reason for a congregation's CMO (Congregational Mission Offering) to be \$0. In most cases, it shouldn't even be close to \$0. In thanks to our Savior and considering the important work done together, pastors and church leaders won't allow a complete lack of financial support for the team. Occasional financial hardships or local challenges may cause a change to our otherwise generous giving plans to Synod – but even then a gift can be given that says, "I fly the flag, I walk with you as you with me, we are thankful for one another and the gospel-focused work we do together – in thanks to our gracious God, I submit SOMETHING! Accept my gift of \$xxx. Count me in!"

What is more, for every congregation in the Synod, our worker training school professors and missionaries are, in a manner of speaking, OUR Called workers. Every parish pastor wants to see them cared for as God wants us cared for... and as *we* wish to be honored and supported. As our "extended" Called staff, every parish pastor and church wants to give our Synod workers "double honor." We do outreach, directly and indirectly, through our respectable, generous CMO.

There will always be differences of opinion on how we train and how we send and how we balance the two. But once decisions are made we submit to the majority and joyfully support the team. And if we give generously in our CMO, we wouldn't need to enter into such discussions in the first place. Missions at home and in the world would be opening and all our workers compensated in codes that are up-to-date or better.

Outreach that any Evangelical Lutheran church will and can do? We gratefully and generously support our team, our Synod. The beauty of our fellowship is seen clearly in our unity of doctrine. The ways we gather different people and cultures can vary as can the styles we use to teach and worship. We "*make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*" (Eph. 4:3). As such, we trust our fellow workers and churches. We rejoice in all WELS gospel ministry that is happening across our country and world. We appreciate our Synod schools, the wider scope of mission work and all support ministries in between. While we avoid careless stereotypes, we can each look at our own ministry calendars to see where we can do more to bring the gospel in contact with more people. We trust one another. We pray for one

another. We encourage one another. We give generously to our joint work. We are Evangelical Lutherans.

### **The Holy Spirit Blesses Every Gospel-Sharing Effort of Evangelical Lutherans**

The outreach suggestions I have humbly offered here are uncomplicated. If the ideas were advanced and difficult, then not every church could do them. This is a practical paper designed to give a simple idea or two for our efforts to share the life-saving message of Jesus with those outside our church family... outreach that any Evangelical Luther pastor or church can do... will want to do. Sometimes outreach suggestions come in big bunches in conference presentations or evangelism books. They seem overwhelming. It's not that we don't want to move, it's just that the push for planning and recruiting, the training and the visiting, the calling and assimilating – it all gets to be intimidating. Since our evangelism truck may not accelerate from 0-60 mph in a short time, we default back to what outreach we've done before... sometimes little... or maybe less. Or maybe we are busy. Our multi-staff congregation is alive with gospel activity – meetings, member counseling sessions and worship. It's not that we don't want to do some outreach work too – but there are only so many hours in a day. What if a congregation finds itself in financial straits? Does outreach cease without a “line item” in the budget? A pastor takes a Call to a new church and senses initial resistance to aggressive evangelism plans. Where's a good starting point?

My prayer is that all will find an idea here to increase mission activity, even if it's from nothing to something or from something to even more. Finally, the Holy Spirit blesses any and all gospel-sharing efforts. Every Evangelical Lutheran's motto could be, “*Just do something.*” In Luke 19, Jesus' Parable of the Minas reminds us that he wants us to be good managers of the gospel. In seeking spiritual blessings for both ourselves and others, we share his Word. The Spirit blesses his gospel to these ends. Pastors teach and preach, counsel and encourage. They proclaim the gospel. To our outreach topic at hand, the Spirit blesses those who use the Word, share the Word and/or gather an audience to teach the Word to them. Like our proclamation of the gospel to our church family, Jesus asks this regarding our gospel sharing outside of our church: do *something*. To this point, I'll share comments made by Pastor C. Westra. I trust he won't mind if I paraphrase some of his thoughts. At some point, Councils and Elders would sit their pastor down for a sobering talk if he wasn't visiting his shut-ins at all, rarely preaching on Sundays, skipping his Bible classes and so forth. Even if the pastor were to object, “But I'm really busy!” Westra's point is that total neglect in these important areas would call for accountability and an insistence on a change in schedule and priorities to make it happen. His follow up question is a fair one, “How about our gospel proclamation to the world outside of the Church?”

Yes, it's true. Gospel proclamation can serve both nurture and outreach goals. A sermon can touch the hearts of both the church and unchurched. An AIC/BIC can be considered outreach, but nurture is being done too. An evangelism application studied in Bible class can result in a member witnessing to his/her neighbor. While this may be true, Jesus' intent was never to have his people hide behind the one so that we can avoid doing the other. Jesus wants us to do “both-and.” And as with all areas of Christian service, our Savior wants our hearts... hearts that are thankful to do our best for our Lord who gave us forgiveness and life. So is it enough, “... *if the extent of my 'outreach' is preaching the gospel to visitors who come to worship?*” If in the most unique situation, this is the best that one can honestly do in outreach activity – then yes.

Thank those visitors for coming and warmly invite them back for many return blessings of the gospel. If the question is asked to hide behind the one (nurture) to avoid the other (outreach) – then no, it’s not acceptable. Our shut-ins need the gospel. The unchurched in our community need it too. To leave either ministry undone would be unfaithful. If we find we have neglected the area of evangelism – or admit we could do a much better of job in this area – take it to Jesus’ cross – then take a small step and do something this month more than you did last month. Trust the Holy Spirit to bless it.

There is an illustration that is tossed around among mission churches. The story has multiple variations, I’m sure. A fisherman heads out onto the lake in his boat. He chooses the wrong time of day to fish. He grabs his rod and reel and attaches his lure. He chooses the wrong lure for the type of fish in the lake. He drops his line into the water and then casts and reels. He chooses the wrong style of fishing. A couple of hours go by with no success. As he packs up his gear, a fish jumps into his boat. In joy he puts the fish on his stringer and heads for his cottage. He tells his wife the unbelievable story – the miracle of the fish in his boat. “I did everything wrong!” said the fisherman. With no argument, his wife responded, “Well, good thing you went fishing then, if you had stayed in the cottage all evening you’d have nothing!”

Evangelical Lutherans who have put even a little energy into mission work know how true this is. The AIC/BIC graduates I thought were going to join the church after class didn’t... the most unlikely students did. The outreach event I organized yielded no noticeable fruits from attendees, but the secretary I had to talk to at the rental shop became a member. *“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit”* (Jn. 3:8). We go fishing for men because Jesus asks us to. We are his instruments. We throw lines into the lake... 1 line or 21. We invite. We share. We keep the gospel the center-piece and goal of all we do. At times, God probably shakes his head at how we go about these things, but he always blesses his gospel for his purposes. Most often the result is fish in our boats. We always rejoice in the miracles of the Spirit. God grows his church... because he is gracious... because his gospel is powerful. Good thing we didn’t sit in the cottage all evening. When it comes to outreach – *do something* – the Holy Spirit will bless it in his own time and way.

*“Outreach That Any Congregation Calling Itself ‘Evangelical Lutheran’ Will Do.”*

- A humble, repentant attitude;
- An easy to follow worship service;
- A friendly, hospitable church home;
- An ongoing Bible basics class;
- A team of united churches trusting and supporting one another;
- A desire to do something more than is being done now in the area of outreach...

These are simple gospel-focused attitudes and actions. Evangelical Lutherans can do these things thankfully and to the best of their ability. Our Savior gives us the gift of heaven and allows us the privilege of telling that good news to others. There are a lot of burning issues begging for time on our ministry calendar each week. There are a few things we don’t want to leave undone. This is one of them.

As I wrap things up – Good Friday and Easter Sunday are the radar. My attention is drawn to John and Peter who are following Jesus into the high priest’s courtyard. It appears John had “unchurched” acquaintances. He worked his connections so he and Peter could follow Jesus... at a safe distance, of course. I recall how we too have a wider circle of friends. Many of them do not know Jesus. The same is true of the church families we shepherd. The same is true

of the communities where our churches are located. For all of the courage to walk into the courtyard that night, we never hear John defend his Savior. We hear Peter actually deny him. My desires to follow Jesus and my intentions to confess him boldly before the world fall short too. When it comes to witnessing, I talk a better game with my church family with whom there is no conflict or controversy. John and Peter failed Jesus. In grace, Jesus still loved them, died for their sins, forgave them, rose to declare their innocence and later used them as his instruments... to share his gospel with thousands and thousands. I see John and Peter. More importantly, I see Jesus. I see his death and resurrection too. For me and all Evangelical Lutherans – there is great, personal comfort in Jesus. And in his powerful gospel, there is great hope for thousands more. Let's share it with them!

God bless our outreach efforts for his glory!

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