

UPON THE LIPS OF ANOTHER CHRISTIAN: PRIVATE CONFESSION AND  
ABSOLUTION AS DESCRIBED BY LUTHERAN PASTORS TODAY

BY

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## ABSTRACT

Confessional Lutherans know from Luther's Small Catechism that private confession and absolution is good and scriptural, but is it feasible to implement into twenty-first century gospel ministry? We know our great Lutheran forefathers like Luther and Chemnitz availed themselves of this practice's benefits, but what does it look like today? Who is doing it, why are they doing it, and what impact does it have? With in-depth interview findings, this paper will present how a handful of Lutheran pastors today make use of private confession and absolution. This information will clarify what this practice can look like, inspire those who wish to begin promoting it, and present stories of the pastoral experience promoting it through various methodologies in different settings.

## INTRODUCTION

### **An unfortunate discrepancy**

In his *Brief Exhortation to Confession*, Dr. Martin Luther once quipped that Christians “ought to be happy to run more than 100 miles”<sup>1</sup> to avail themselves of the opportunity to privately confess sins to a pastor and receive absolution. He said that lay people should freely come for it and compel pastors to give them the opportunity.<sup>2</sup> It would not be a stretch to say that the average Lutheran today would find what Luther said about this surprising and outside of their range of experience. In fact, the spiritual practice of private confession and absolution seems so rare today that meeting someone who practices it regularly is like meeting an athlete who runs one hundred-mile Ultra-Marathons. “*You do what? How often?*” And yet, Luther taught this practice in the Fifth Chief Part of his Small Catechism, not for a small elite subset of Christians, but for average households and children. Luther intended this practice not to be a rarity, but a regularity.

The attitude Luther had toward private absolution is not the normal attitude among confessional Lutherans today, especially in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). One can most easily come to that conclusion by noticing how little private confession and absolution plays a role in the average Lutheran’s spiritual life. I asked Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) President Earle Treptow, the District President of the WELS Nebraska District from 2010–2015, what he thought the state of this spiritual practice was. He said that, from his conversations with the other district presidents in the WELS, he got the impression that very few WELS members availed themselves of the gift of private absolution.<sup>3</sup> This confirms that the state

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1. Paul T. McCain et al., eds., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions--A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*, trans. William H. T. Dau and Gerhard Friedrich Bente, 1st edition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 653.

2. McCain et al., *Concordia*, 653.

3. Earle Treptow, conversation with author, November 13, 2019.

of this practice in WELS has for the most part remained the same since the synod's *Christian Worship Manual* stated this in 1993: "It is generally admitted and commiserated that private confession has fallen into great neglect among us, and that to our hurt."<sup>4</sup>

This practice is not only rarely utilized in the WELS, but also among other Lutheran church bodies. *Confession and Absolution, a Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations* (CTCR), from The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) in April 2018, says, "As the 21st century has dawned, while some pastors regularly offer private confession and absolution to their congregations, anecdotal evidence suggests that few laity make use of this gift. The resolution addressed in this report (2013 Res. 4–13) suggests that this is also true of a majority of the Synod's pastors."<sup>5</sup> While CTCR reports from the LCMS are not official synod statements, this indicates that this practice is also not regular in the LCMS. The results of this research's interviews with various ministers from confessional Lutheran church bodies (reported below in the body of this paper) also confirm private confession's general disuse.

These findings of private confession's general disuse present confessional Lutherans with an issue: our Confessions say that we not only are to retain this practice but highly esteem it. Phillip Melancthon writes in the Augsburg Confession that "our churches teach that private Absolution should be retained in the churches"<sup>6</sup> and Luther says in the Smalcald Articles that "since private Absolution originates in the Office of the Keys, it should not be despised, but greatly and highly esteemed, along with all other offices of the Christian Church."<sup>7</sup> Similar

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4. Kermit Moldenhauer, *Christian Worship Manual* (Northwestern, 1993), 220.

5. *Confession and Absolution*, The Commission on Theology and Church Relations (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, April 2018), 11.

6. AC XI.1

7. SA VIII.2.

sentiments to these are found in the Small Catechism, the Apology, and the Smalcald Articles.<sup>8</sup> Now, a *quia* subscription to the Book of Concord does not require adherence to every description of practice. I am not saying that all Lutherans today ought to have the exact same attitude and love for this practice as Luther did. However, when a practice is mentioned and upheld so frequently throughout our Lutheran Confessions, it would be wise to consider the discrepancy between our current implementation of this practice and its described prominence in our confessional documents.

It would be appropriate to ask what confessional Lutheran churches miss out on when private confession is not highly esteemed. That question could be answered a number of ways and will be throughout the course of this paper, but for one possible answer consider a story contained in an article on the website *Bread for Beggars* on November 7, 2019. Brandon Steenbock writes about a woman who grew up as a faithful attendee of a WELS church. In her teens, the woman struggled with same-sex attraction and had a sexual relationship with another female. She knew what she was doing was wrong, but she never confessed her sin to anyone. The sin weighed heavily on her for years. Although she constantly heard the gospel, she doubted it could cover her specific sin. This is how she speaks about that: “I heard lots of sermons about Jesus forgiving ‘anything,’ but they were never about me. Truth is, I was dirty. His Word told me I was forgiven, but my sin had never been spoken aloud. I was still sure no pastor would understand. I was still sure no Christian would know what to do with same-sex attraction. I absolutely had to keep my sin a secret.”<sup>9</sup> The word of forgiveness in the sermons she heard, in

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8. SC V; Ap XII.99–101; SA III. viii.1.

9. Brandon Steenbock, “‘And That Is What Some of You Were’: Forgiveness, and ‘the Sin That Would Make God Throw Up,’” *Bread for Beggars*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.breadforbeggars.com/2019/11/and-that-is-what-some-of-you-were-forgiveness-and-the-sin-that-would-make-god-throw-up/>.

the general absolutions in the beginning of worship, and in the Holy Communion of which she partook did not get through to her. Private confession did.

She met a man in college whom she could trust with her secrets. She felt he would not hold them against her. She confessed to him. Here is how she describes how he responded: “He was... only a little overwhelmed. And more than a little capable. [He said] ‘Jesus forgives you. And so do I.’ Forgiveness. Sweet, blessed, amazing forgiveness. Forgiveness given by Jesus through another human being... Jesus used his words to share the specific Gospel my past sexual sins needed. Jesus loves me. Jesus forgives me. Jesus blesses me.”<sup>10</sup> We praise God that this woman’s burden was lifted through a private confession of her sins. However, in this case, the confession was not to a pastor, but simply to another Christian.

This illustrates an important point Luther brings out in *A Brief Exhortation to Confession*. He says there are three types of confession: (a) confession made to one’s pastor, (b) confession to God, and (c) confession that is made to one’s neighbor.<sup>11</sup> He says these are all good and encouraged by God and we would do right to remember so. However, with those distinctions made, it is not difficult to imagine that the opportunity for regular private confession with her pastor might have given that guilt-ridden woman access to words of personal forgiveness and comfort years earlier. Unfortunately, she shared that she did not feel her pastor would understand her specific sin.

Imagine if her church culture had included general recognition that private confession is a healthy and regular part of a Christian’s life. It would have required the culture that Luther envisioned, a culture where private confession is highly esteemed. One thing churches miss out

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10. Steenbock, “And That Is What Some of You Were.”

11. McCain et al., *Concordia*, 650.

on when private confession is not valued is the chance to relieve the heaviest and most secret burdens that plague peoples' consciences. This shows the benefit and beauty of the practice. It is one avenue God gives Christians to share God's forgiveness with each other.

Think about this practice through the lens of baptism. Availing oneself of the benefits of private confession and absolution is a way to live in one's baptism. Verbalizing one's sins in the presence of another human being is to drown one's old Adam and put him to death. Standing up from a kneel after hearing forgiveness from the pastor is to "arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."<sup>12</sup> Following in the wake of C. F. W. Walther, Lutherans earnestly desire to master the distinction between law and gospel and apply that word of God to themselves. There is hardly a clearer way to apply law and gospel to oneself than to confess one's sins against the law to a pastor and to cling to the sweet forgiveness of the gospel the pastor speaks. Simply put, to want a private absolution is to want to hear the forgiveness that Jesus has prepared for you to hear.

When the author began research for this paper, he discovered he was not alone in his belief that this practice is still beneficial for today. Seminarian Caleb Free wrote his thesis on this practice and this writer agrees with the conclusions he makes in his abstract. Free says,

1) While nowhere in Scripture is private confession and absolution commanded, Scripture clearly supports the practice. 2) Our Lutheran church fathers treasured the practice of private confession and absolution and stressed the importance of it in their writings and their practice. 3) As a synod, we need to do a better job of instructing our people about the practice and benefits of private confession and absolution. Not every church needs to practice private confession and absolution, but every church should know about the practice.<sup>13</sup>

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12. *Small Catechism - NIV* (Northwestern, 2017), 320.

13. Caleb Free, "Private Confession and Absolution: A Hidden Treasure," (MDiv thesis, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2013).  
<https://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/79/Free.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

Free concludes this is a scriptural practice, our Lutheran forefathers valued it, and the WELS would do better to do more instruction on this matter.

### **Purpose**

This paper will build on the conclusions drawn by Free's research. If private confession and absolution is a beneficial practice that needs to be taught, championed, and made available in confessional Lutheran churches, how are we to teach and encourage it in our time? One problem seminarians and pastors in the WELS have is that, because this practice has fallen into such disuse, there are precious few examples of how to apply this practice in a modern setting. We have little experiential knowledge of how to promote this practice and hardly any idea of what making use of this practice looks like. Are pastors making use of the practice for themselves? What does it look like when they take penitents through this rite, if they use a written rite at all? How are they promoting it? What success have they had, if any? Lastly, we know this practice is good and scriptural, but is it feasible to implement into twenty-first century gospel ministry? In brief, how are confessional Lutheran pastors making use of the rite of private confession and absolution in the twenty-first century?

This paper will present what literature from the last couple decades exists on this practice and focus especially on the methods and stories of the few confessional Lutheran pastors who regularly utilize, teach, emphasize, and offer private confession and absolution. I found a number of such Lutheran pastors through personal networking and then interviewed them. The findings of those interviews are in the body of this paper. By presenting specific examples of current use, I intend this paper to clarify what this practice can look like, inspire those who wish to begin promoting it, and present stories of the pastoral experience promoting it through various

methodologies in different settings. At the end, I will offer tentative conclusions about what appears to be working and what does not.

### **Thesis statement**

My research has led to the following conclusions. Although the practice of private confession and absolution has fallen into general disuse, there are some pastors who make use of it regularly and find it highly beneficial. Some Lutheran pastors find it integral to their ministry and promote it as a regular form of pastoral care. Especially within the LCMS, but also in the WELS and ELS, there seems to be a recent renewed interest in availing oneself of the benefits of the practice and promoting it. This renewed interest exists despite the generally low average number of people who avail themselves of its blessings, even after having been significantly instructed in it.

## PART I: PASTORS WRITE ABOUT CONFESSION

This is a mixed-methods research paper. Current literature and interviews were used. The following review of literature is mostly limited to confessional Lutheran materials from the twenty-first century. It will not cover literature on the history of the practice, because this paper's focus is on its current use. Free says, "The reinstatement of private confession and absolution is a matter that needs to be looked at seriously."<sup>14</sup> I concur. The review below takes a serious look at what the current state of this practice is, how it is viewed, how it is used, and what the next steps to be taken are.

The practice of private confession and absolution is generally agreed to be in disuse. David Schmidt says it has nearly disappeared.<sup>15</sup> Karl-Hermann Kandler speaks of the practice needing to be restored and says, "There are congregations where individual confession is expressly offered, although it is rarely received."<sup>16</sup> In his paper presented at the 2007 WELS Synod Convention, Treptow points out that there is quite a discrepancy between how the two great Lutheran Martins (Luther and Chemnitz) viewed the practice and how many Lutherans do today. "What would the Martins write today? Has this wonderful gift of private absolution been relegated to the closet as 'too Catholic?' It certainly can't be that there is less need for it now than in a previous generation."<sup>17</sup>

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14. Free, "Private Confession and Absolution," 29.

15. David W. Schmidt, "The Use of the Keys in Public and Private Confession" (paper presented at the Colonial South Pastors' Conference of the North Atlantic District, Jacksonville, NC, 2004), 5, <https://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/2555/SchmidtKeys.pdf?sequence=1>.

16. Karl-Hermann Kandler, "Luther and Lutherans on Confession, 'the Forgotten Sacrament,'" *Lutheran Quarterly* 31.1 (2017): 62.

17. Earle Treptow, "Sanctification: Set Apart by God's Grace to Serve" (paper presented at the 59<sup>th</sup> Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, New Ulm, MN, 2007), 14.

In this age of the practice's general disuse, what do pastors think of it? Well, those who think highly of it think of it as pastoral care. In Dr. Harold Senkbeil's award-winning<sup>18</sup> pastoral theology book, he stresses private confession and absolution eight different times as a form a regular pastoral care.<sup>19</sup> John Pless and Schmidt agree. Pless says the absolution becomes the basis for more pastoral counsel<sup>20</sup> while Schmidt says he would begin every organized counseling session by taking the person through the rite of private confession and absolution in a hymnal.<sup>21</sup>

Another recurring theme was that pastors brought up therapy with private confession and absolution. Kandler and Pless thought that private absolution ought to be distinguished from all forms of therapy. The pastor is not a therapist.<sup>22</sup> Kandler says, "Usually today, the psychotherapist, entirely secularized, stands in the position of the father confessor. But he can only uncover and explain guilt, he cannot forgive it."<sup>23</sup> Although Pless is adamant about this distinction, he seems to admit that there is a slight therapeutic nature to private absolution.<sup>24</sup>

Senkbeil seems to have picked up on that slight therapeutic nature of the practice as well, because he describes the regular use of private confession and absolution as "baptismal therapy."<sup>25</sup> Although Pless does not use the term baptismal therapy, he does see availing oneself

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18. *The Care of Souls* won *The Gospel Coalition* 2019 Best Book of the Year award for the topic of ministry.

19. Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart* (Lexham Press, 2019), 48, 76, 90, 102, 129, 141, 156–157, 186–187.

20. John T Pless, "Confession and Absolution," *Lutheran Quarterly* 30.1 (2016): 34.

21. Schmidt, "The Use of the Keys in Public and Private Confession," 5.

22. John T. Pless, "Your Pastor Is Not Your Therapist: Private Confession—the Ministry of Repentance and Faith," *A Reader in Pastoral Theology* (2001): 4.

23. Kandler, "Luther and Lutherans on Confession, 'the Forgotten Sacrament,'" 61.

24. Pless, "Confession and Absolution," 38.

25. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*, 186–187.

of the practice's benefits as a way to live in one's baptism. He reminds us that this is one of the ways Luther saw the practice.<sup>26</sup> To explain what he means by baptismal therapy, Senkbeil tells a story of a man who was struggling with alcoholism and sexual sins who would regularly come to privately confess:

It all revolved around proximity to God. The more [the penitent's] sins isolated him from God, the more he needed to be called back into the community of faith and communion with God. Baptismal therapy for [the penitent] involved a repeated cycle of death and rebirth, restoring him the innocence and purity he had long ago been given by baptism into Christ, the Holy One. [The penitent's] willpower was helpless to overcome his compulsion, but in Christ he was given a new mind and a new will day by day.<sup>27</sup>

Senkbeil emphasizes here that this practice can be used as a sort of continued therapy to bring an addict forgiveness and renewed desire to do better.

This practice is also being promoted as pastoral care for pastors. In 2007, Treptow urged the ministers at the WELS Convention to avail themselves of it as part of their lives of sanctification. He says, "Knowing the grace of your God, who has provided a shepherd for your soul, put aside those fears and run to private absolution. You'll be glad you did!"<sup>28</sup> Senkbeil, who is the Executive Director of *Doxology* (a continuing education organization for pastors) makes a similar plea. He says, "What's good for others is good for us too. We need to unburden our hearts and minds; we need to confess our sins and receive absolution. Plainly, we [pastors] need pastoral care just as much as anyone else."<sup>29</sup>

Another major issue recently discussed on this topic is how absolute the confessional seal is. The confessional seal is a term used to describe the oath some ministers make to never

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26. Pless, "Confession and Absolution," 30.

27. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*, 186.

28. Treptow, "Sanctification," 14.

29. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*, 129.

divulge the sins they hear during private confession. Confessional Lutherans have recently debated how strictly to hold to that oath when severe criminal activity such as child abuse is confessed. Victor Vieth sums up the legal constraints put upon clergy well when he says, “In the United States, clergy are mandated reporters of child abuse in nearly every state. In some states, though, clergy are not required to report cases of child abuse if the knowledge is gained within the context of the confessional. However, state law determines when a private confession is privileged.”<sup>30</sup> For instance, Wisconsin law exempts a pastor from reporting child abuse information if “under the disciplines, tenets, or traditions of his or her religion has a duty or is expected to keep those communications secret.”<sup>31</sup>

David Webber makes the case that Lutheran pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) are to uphold the confessional seal. Concerning a law such as the one in Wisconsin Statute 48.981 (quoted above), he writes:

The historic disciplines, tenets, and traditions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church do in fact recognize and require the inviolability of the seal of confession in such [child abuse] cases, so that Lutheran pastors are accordingly not being called upon by this law – or by similarly-worded laws in other states – to violate the seal of confession. Lutheran pastors are, however, required to report any abuse that they themselves witness, that is reported to them by a victim, or that they learn about in some other way, apart from the confessional.<sup>32</sup>

Webber’s argument is that the historic disciplines of Lutheranism communicate the upholding of the confessional seal, so that Lutheran pastors can uphold confidentiality about sins confessed to

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30. Victor Vieth, “Child Abuse and the Lutheran Confessional: A Call to Elevate Christ’s Teachings on Children above Church Traditions,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 46.3 (2019): 50.

31. Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2019). “Clergy as Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect,” Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau, 19, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/clergymandated/>.

32. David J. Webber, “The Seal of Confession in the Evangelical Lutheran Church, with Special Reference to Confessions of Child Abuse,” 2019, 3, <http://www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/WebberSealOfConfession.pdf>.

them without breaking such a state law. Webber also makes this comment: “The Evangelical Lutheran Church would, in principle, recognize the right of the civil authorities to require people – including pastors – to divulge their knowledge of certain current and future crimes, regardless of how they obtained that knowledge.”<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, Vieth says Lutheran practice should put less stress on the confessional seal and concern itself more with the wellbeing of victims (especially children). He says the three main Lutheran church bodies in the U.S.A. (ELCA, LCMS, and WELS) all have published scholarly works indicating that the confessional seal can be broken when keeping a secret would endanger lives.<sup>34</sup> What is presented here on the topic of the confessional seal is but a brief overview. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go further. The reason it is addressed here at all is to illustrate that there is not universal agreement within confessional Lutheran church bodies today about how absolute the seal of the confessional is or how far it extends. The pastors interviewed for this paper offer their personal experiences navigating this topic. For more rationale behind either side of the discussion, consult either of the two works cited.

The last major area of discussion on private absolution’s current use is on its reintroduction as a regular practice. Kandler seems pessimistic but determined to continue trying to reintroduce it. He states:

It is not in our hands, whether confession can be restored—this is the work of the Holy Spirit—but we can and should work toward it, as we have the express mandate [John 20:21–23] of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ to do it. It is doubtful that early training at childhood and confirmation age will help. Do people no longer need it? Talk shows suggest that they do. We can only pray that the mandate of Jesus Christ would be received and fulfilled.<sup>35</sup>

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33. Webber, “The Seal of Confession,” 8.

34. Vieth, “Child Abuse,” 50.

35. Kandler, “Luther and Lutherans on Confession, ‘the Forgotten Sacrament,’” 61–62.

Also determined to revive the practice, Pless suggests that a recovery of this would have to mean a rediscovery of the natural rhythm of a repentant life. In addition to that, he believes that good preaching and continued catechesis on the topic will be key in its reintroduction as a common practice.<sup>36</sup>

Another really expansive resource is Peter Bender's *Lutheran Catechesis*, which devotes thirty-eight pages to teaching the Fifth Chief Part (Confession). The book is kind of like a catechism manual on steroids. It gives a thorough treatment on each Chief Part, gives commentary on various Bible stores to help teach it, and even includes a sample rite for private confession. The commentary, directions, and rationale for what the confessor does during the rite included with the sample rite are especially helpful.<sup>37</sup>

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36. Pless, "Your Pastor Is Not Your Therapist," 4–6.

37. Peter Bender, *Lutheran Catechesis: Catechist Edition*, 2nd ed. (Sussex: Concordia Catechetical Academy, 2011), 234–272.

## PART II: INTERVIEW METHODOLOGY

### Interview questions

Interview was the main instrument of research, because I wanted to examine modern, lived experience on this topic. Through the following questions I have sought to answer this general thesis question: how are confessional Lutheran pastors making use of the rite of private confession and absolution in the twenty-first century?

#### Pastors describe themselves confessing

Question 1. Do you have a father confessor?

Question 2. If you do, to whom do you go?

Question 3. If you do, why do you do this?

#### Pastors describe themselves as confessors (What does this practice look like?)

Question 4. How often and when does it happen?

Question 5. Where does it happen?

Question 6. Do you vest? If so, how?

Question 7. How do you communicate confidentiality?

7a. Do you hold to the confessional seal?

7b. Do you record this as a pastoral act? (Is it secret as well as private?)

7c. What do you do about mandatory reporting laws?

Question 8. What rite do you use, if any?

Question 9. What extra encouragement do you offer after the absolution?

Question 10. How do you teach/encourage this practice?

### Pastors' takeaways

Question 11. What benefit do people see from it?

Question 12. What has worked to promote this and what has not?

Question 13. What is this practice's niche in society?

### **Rationale for interview questions**

Question 1: Do you have a father confessor?

A father confessor is the pastor to whom a penitent privately confesses his/her sins. I asked the interviewees about their own personal use of private confession, because I was interested in their personal experience with it, whether they be confessor or penitent. Also, pastors need to be pastored. I wondered whether or not private confession and absolution could play a role in the continuing spiritual care for pastors. Lastly, I thought it would be valuable to get insight on what goes on in the mind of a penitent Christian who verbally confesses his sins in another's presence.

Question 2: If you do [have a father confessor], to whom do you go?

For people (especially ministers) curious about the use of this practice, I thought it would be useful to hear to which people pastors go in order to confess their sins. With ministry as taxing as it is, the question, "Who pastors the pastor?" is an important one.

Question 3: If you do [make use of private confession yourself], why do you do it?

I thought it would be insightful to see what drives people to make use of a seldom-used practice that for so many people seems old fashioned, "too catholic," or no longer relevant.

Question 4: How often does it [private confession] happen?

The general consensus from those with whom I have discussed this topic is that this practice does not happen much anymore, so I wanted to see how true this was. Also, since the majority of my interviews were with pastors who had a special interest and passion for this practice, I was interested to see what impact their passion, encouragement, and teaching of this practice had on the number of times this practice was utilized in their churches.

Question 5: Where does it happen?

I was curious about the context and environment around this practice. Where something takes place influences peoples' perception of it.

Question 6: Do you vest? If so, how?

Since private confession is an official pastoral act where forgiveness is distributed, I wondered whether or not pastors dressed in any liturgical garb while hearing confessions.

Question 7: How do you communicate confidentiality?

This question is closely tied with the next three, so they will be dealt with under one section in the interview finding section below. I wanted to understand how these pastors view and communicate issues of confidentiality with their congregations and with the penitent who come to confess.

Question 7a: Do you hold to the confessional seal?

The confessional seal is a term used to describe the oath some ministers make to never divulge the sins they hear during private confession. Currently, there is discussion around whether or not to hold to that oath when severe criminal activity such as child abuse is confessed. I wanted to see what those interviewed had to contribute to the discussion.

Question 7b: Do you record this as a pastoral act? (Is it secret as well as private?)

I started asking this question after noticing diversity in interviews about whether private confession is secret as well as private. Secret here indicates that a penitent's presence with the pastor would not be easily identified as a private confession situation. Private here indicates merely that what was said during the confession would not be shared.

Question 7c: What do you do about mandatory reporting laws?

I asked this question to present the various views on the rigidity of pastors' implementation of the confessional seal. I was curious if they would make exceptions in cases of hearing confessions of severe criminal conduct, especially those involving child abuse.

Question 8: What rite do you use, if any?

I wanted to gain an understanding of what private confession situations looked like and whether or not that involved a written rite.

Question 9: What extra encouragement do you offer after the absolution?

In his sample form for private confession and absolution, Luther writes, “But for those who have great burdens on their consciences, or are distressed and tempted, the confessor will know how to comfort and to encourage them to believe with more passages of Scripture.”<sup>38</sup> Other pastors and I were curious what encouragement confessors routinely offer and from what sources they got that encouragement.

Question 10: How do you teach/encourage this practice?

With this practice in such disuse and not frequently mentioned, it is useful to know what methods are used to teach it.

Question 11: What benefit do people see from it?

Answers to this question might help answer whether or not the practice is worth trying to revive and uphold.

Question 12: What has worked to promote this and what has not?

Considering the practice’s general disuse, promoting the practice has proved challenging. The answers to this question may provide direction to pastors considering a renewal of the practice in their congregation.

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38. SC V.

Question 13: What is this practice's niche in society?

Answers to this question could help show how utilization of this practice could especially address any current problems people face.

**Biographical information on interviewees**

In this section, brief biographical information will be provided, so the reader will understand some of the networking I did and why I selected those I interviewed. Unless otherwise noted, all the information presented in the interview findings section of this paper comes from the interviews with these men. To preserve anonymity, some names have been redacted and are referred to as "Source A, Source B," etc. If the reader would like to contact one the anonymous sources for further question, contact the author<sup>39</sup> to see if that can be arranged.

Richard Gurgel<sup>40</sup>

Richard Gurgel is a Professor at WLS and the director of *Grow in Grace*, a continuing education program for pastors in the WELS. In 2020, he takes on a new role as the next president of Martin Lutheran College. He also heads up an offshoot of *Grow in Grace* called *Pastor Partners Mentoring*. Gurgel says that this offshoot essentially seeks to provide every new pastor in the WELS with a mentor who is also a father confessor. I wanted Gurgel's perspective on how the pastors in this program use private confession and why he thought this was a beneficial thing for them.

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39. Email: [Chester.Reinemann@gmail.com](mailto:Chester.Reinemann@gmail.com) Phone: 651.472.3067

40. Richard Gurgel, interview with author, Mequon, November 19, 2019.

### Earle Treptow

Earle Treptow serves as president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Formerly, he was a pastor in and District President of the Nebraska District in WELS.

### William Kessel

William Kessel was an ELS pastor in California and Arizona. He also served as a professor of religion at Bethany Lutheran College and Seminary. After being born and raised on the White Mountain Apache Reservation, he returned there to do his PhD thesis work in cultural anthropology and Apache religious cults. I consulted Dr. Kessel to see if he could give possible explanations for the anomaly of Source G's experience with private confession.

### Source A

Source A is a pastor of a medium-sized LCMS church in the Milwaukee area. He has personally practiced private confession nearly every month since his vicar year.

### Source B

Source B is a WELS pastor and professor at a Lutheran college in Wisconsin. He previously was a pastor of a medium-sized church in a rural area where he promoted private confession and absolution.

### Source C

Source C is a pastor of a medium sized WELS church in rural Minnesota. His predecessor also promoted private confession and absolution.

## Source D

Source D is a pastor in a medium-sized WELS church in a suburb of Houston, Texas.

## Source E

Source E is a WELS minister in *Crosstrain Ministries*. *CrossTrain* coaching provides a holistic approach for WELS pastors to manage their wellbeing. It gives pastors a “network of brotherly relationships” which often includes opportunities for private confession and absolution. I interviewed this man to see how pastors utilize private confession within *CrossTrain*.

## Source F

Source F is a pastor of an ELS congregation in Arizona. He is a father confessor for other pastors and promotes the practice in his church.

## Source G

Source G is a pastor of a large WELS church in rural Arizona. He is known for hearing a lot of private confessions.

## Source H

Source H is a WELS pastor and professor.

## Source I

Source I is a LCMS pastor, former seminary professor, and author.

## Source J

Source J is a WELS pastor and professor.

## Source K

Source K is a WELS pastor in institutional ministries.

### PART III: PASTORS DESCRIBE THEMSELVES CONFESSING

#### **1. Do you have a father confessor? 2. If you do, to whom do you go?**

The majority (8/10) of the men of whom I asked this question have a father confessor. Of those who said yes, some have more than one pastor to whom they confess. Those who are in *CrossTrain Ministries* have at least two. There was one man I interviewed who confesses to three different pastors on a regular basis.

Although there was a clear majority of affirmative answers, the range between the negative and affirmative answers is intriguing. While Source I and Source C thought it was unthinkable not to have a father confessor, Source D said he had never considered having one. This illustrates the wide range of value pastors place on the use of this practice for themselves.

The majority of affirmatives to question one makes sense, because I chose whom to interview by personal networking, not by random sampling. I chose these men to interview because I had heard they had something to say about private confession and absolution. Not surprisingly, the one pastor interviewed who didn't especially promote private confession (Source D) hadn't thought about making use of it himself.<sup>41</sup> Every interviewee except for Source D had placed an above average emphasis on the teaching of private confession in their ministry. From this we can conclude that the pastors who are emphasizing this practice in their congregations generally make use of the practice themselves.

One anomaly was found with Source B, the other pastor along with Source D who did not answer affirmatively. He had privately confessed his sins in the past and had spent considerable time in confirmation class and adult Bible studies teaching and promoting the practice, but he did

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41. Although Source D didn't have another pastor to whom he regularly confessed, he did mention he would occasionally call up brothers in the ministry for support. In those brotherly conversations, sometimes sins would be confessed and forgiveness shared, which would be private confession in a roundabout way.

not currently avail himself of its benefits. However, he lamented this and said having a father confessor would be ideal. The problem he faced was finding someone in his rural ministry setting to whom he was comfortable confessing. He thought about confessing to his circuit pastor, but the fact that he was buddies with him made him shy away from doing so. Source B concluded with a statement that will be vehemently opposed by the statements of some of those who answered affirmatively. He said, “And some guys will say, ‘I won't do it [hear a confession and absolve] unless I am also going to confession,’ but I think that's an unnecessary burden. So I don't think it's a prerequisite, but it certainly is wise to have that.”<sup>42</sup> The opposite view will be covered in the findings of question three below.

All the men who answered affirmatively said they confessed to another pastor or retired pastor. The types of pastors to whom they confessed varied. Some confessed to another pastor of similar status in ministry while others confessed to their circuit pastor. It is notable that none confessed to their district president. It may be that the supervisory dynamic between pastor and district president seems to steer pastors away from such a father confessor. Authority difference was not always a deal-breaker, however, because one of the interviewees chose to confess to his executive director (the ranking pastor within his own ministry team).

What Source E said about why pastors generally confess to other pastors and not to laymen is significant. He said that pastors do a lot of work on grace. It is not that lay members don't “get” grace, he says, but some have an unreasonable expectation of their pastor. They might not be able to look past a confession that their pastor makes to them and still see them as their pastor. For this reason, he discourages pastors from fully disclosing their sins to their members.

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42. Source B, conversation with author, October 8, 2019.

The nature of the private confession sessions among these pastors varied. Sometimes the private confession sessions were conducted through a digital medium (such as Skype). Other times they were in person with a pastor in the immediate area of their home ministry. Generally, the men who would privately confess over a digital medium were in a pastoral coaching network such as *CrossTrain Ministries*. This is because the coach or peer coach to whom they would confess would occasionally not reside in their immediate area. The pastors who were not in a pastoral coaching network would generally privately confess in person. The pastors confessed on average somewhere between monthly and quarterly.

There is some evidence for the renewed interest in private confession recently. Networks and programs have developed in the WELS which often include encouragement and opportunities for pastors to avail themselves of this practice's benefits. We'll explore two of those in a brief excursus below.

Excursus: How *CrossTrain Ministries* and *Pastor Partner Mentoring* include frequent private confession and absolution

About a hundred WELS pastors are currently being served within *CrossTrain* and have regular encouragement and opportunity to privately confess sin and be absolved. Private confession and absolution is only a small part of *CrossTrain Ministries*, but it is a necessary one. Generally, it occurs organically and informally within coaching conversations. Many of the men within *CrossTrain* wouldn't speak of it using the exact words "private confession and absolution" nor would they use a written rite from a hymnal for it, yet sins are confessed and absolution is given in private. Similarly, the term "father confessor" would generally not be used. Within this ministry, they use the words "coach" or "peer coach."

*CrossTrain* is a network with two levels. There are coaches and peer coaches. Generally, the men who have been within the *CrossTrain* program for significant time and who have had specific training are asked to be coaches. Members meet in person or digitally with their coach once a month, while they meet with their peer coach once a week. When one meets with his coach, the coach encourages. When one meets with his peer, the encouragement is mutual. According to Source H (a member of *CrossTrain*), private confession and absolution is a natural outcome in one-third to one-fourth of these coaching meetings.

While private confession and absolution is a natural outcome from these meetings, it is not necessarily the focus or the goal. Rather, trust, transparency, and accountability are the focus. In reference to how private confession occurs within these *CrossTrain* conversations, Source E says that the men are encouraged to be transparent with themselves first, then with God, and finally with other men. That transparency is about sharing emotion, feelings, trust, and sometimes leads to sharing struggles and sins in life. He stresses that only after confessing sins to God ought one to confess those sins to another. He sums *CrossTrain* up well with this: “It is a conversation that’s ongoing, that’s built around trust and transparency that develops an authentic relationship where someone feels safe. They understand grace first and foremost and then experience the benefit of confession and accountability.”<sup>43</sup>

Also within the last decade, the program *Pastor Partners Mentoring* has and continues to give new pastors in the WELS a mentor and father confessor. WLS Professor Richard Gurgel was there when this program was born. As an offshoot of the continuing education program *Grow in Grace*, *Pastor Partners Mentoring* was created, with Gurgel at its head. This offshoot program sought to assign a more experienced pastor to care for each new graduate. Gurgel says

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43. Source E, conversation with author, September 24, 2019.

that, since the implementation of *Pastor Partners Mentoring*, the WELS is holding on to more young pastors than it has for four decades. He said it has also built a “refreshing honesty” in the synod’s midst.<sup>44</sup> The experience of *Pastor Partners Mentoring* suggests that private confession and absolution can play an important role in the spiritual care for pastors.

### **3. If you do [make use of private confession for yourself], why do you do this?**

All the pastors were in agreement on the main reason they availed themselves of private confession and absolution. They all conveyed a love and a longing for Jesus’ forgiveness of their sins spoken in a personal way over them. The second reason a few of the pastors gave is that privately confessing sins to another is necessary to make one an effective father confessor for someone else. We’ll deal with the main reason first.

The pastors gave insightful descriptions of why individual absolutions were so important to them. The most notable will be repeated here. Gurgel points to his need for a very personal absolution when he says, “The hardest person to call to repentance is me. The hardest person to speak Jesus’ forgiveness to is me.”<sup>45</sup> Source C says he goes to confession, because he is a Christian. He echoes the thoughts of Luther in his *Brief Exhortation to Confession* when he says, “When I urge you to go to Confession, I am doing nothing else than urging you to be a Christian.”<sup>46</sup> Source K says he lets his faults wear away at himself too frequently and needs someone else for comfort. The one who had the most to say about why he avails himself of this practice was Source A. Source A says:

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44. Richard Gurgel, conversation with author, November 19, 2019.

45. Richard Gurgel, conversation with author, November 19, 2019.

46. McCain et al., *Concordia*, 653.

I go because my foremost need is the forgiveness of my sins and God has promised to forgive them. I also do it in opposition and in warfare to the devil because every day we're hearing the preaching of the devil in our ear. He's constantly tormenting us, replaying our sins in our mind. We need to hear the living voice of the gospel... I go because the LORD invites me. He beckons me to come and hear his voice and because I'm tired of hearing the voice of the enemy. I recognize that God uses men to speak that gospel to me, that absolution comes upon the lips of another Christian.<sup>47</sup>

He continues by saying what a benefit the practice is for his daily life. Although it doesn't always make him feel good, he always leaves with a good conscience. That clean conscience enables him to love his wife, care for his children, and care for his flock. Generally, he says the practice makes his work more enjoyable. Even though this practice is clearly so central to his life as a Christian, he was careful not to downplay the public absolutions spoken in Sunday worship or the other ways forgiveness is distributed through the means of grace. "The gospel doesn't come in fractions,"<sup>48</sup> he said.

A secondary reason three men had for doing it themselves was that they considered it a prerequisite to hear someone else's confession. Source C considers it malpractice for a pastor to hear confessions from others and not confess himself. Source I agrees: "No one hears confession without himself being a penitent."<sup>49</sup> He compares it to how unusual it would be to distribute communion without ever receiving it yourself. Source E and Source I agree with this as well and offer the same general rationale. Source E says private confession helps a pastor to not be judgmental. If a pastor doesn't confess on a regular basis to God or to someone else, he can tend to become self-righteous when others unpack their baggage. He says if one is self-righteous, then

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47. Source A, conversation with author, October 22, 2019.

48. Source A, conversation with author, October 22, 2019.

49. Source I, conversation with author, December 2, 2019.

it is difficult to hear others confess without giving off negative body language. In a workshop he wrote to teach private confession, Senkbeil adds:

The ancient wisdom of the church warns against hearing confession without yourself confessing (opens the door to pride and abuse of the confessional). Some of the comments I hear from pastors who are also penitents are: “I don’t know what I’d do without it.” And “I hate it.” Unless we ourselves know experientially the frustration, humiliation and pain of Confession as well as the unbounded joy of Absolution we are a poor Confessor.<sup>50</sup>

These three men disagree with Source B, who thinks the idea of the practice as a prerequisite would be unnecessarily burdensome. All four of these men agree that a pastor being a penitent himself is ideal.

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50. Harold Senkbeil, “Valid and Certain in Heaven Also: The Cure of Souls through Individual Confession and Absolution” (DOXOLOGY, 2010), 30.

## PART IV: PASTORS DESCRIBE THEMSELVES AS CONFESSORS (WHAT DOES THIS PRACTICE LOOK LIKE?)

### **4. How often and when does it [private confession and absolution] happen?**

These pastors hear private confession with a huge range in frequency. There was a group of pastors with fairly low average numbers and then a few who had extremely high numbers in comparison. Surprisingly, factors that did not by themselves affect frequency were posting times (to offer to hear private confession) and other passive forms of encouragement/advertisement. However, a pastoral attitude that views every conversation as an opportunity for hearing private confession made the most effect on frequency.

The group of pastors who experienced similarly infrequent numbers of people privately confessing reported the following statistics. Source D had about 12 different people privately confess within 17 years. Source F had 10 different people come within 14 years. Source B reported having about 6–10 different people in 9 years. Source C had about 10–15 people in 9 years (although he said it happened many more times informally in the midst of more casual conversations). In those numbers, Source B and Source C did not count the entire recent confirmation classes of whom they heard private confessions (which would have increased their numbers significantly).<sup>51</sup> All four of these men noted that only a handful of their penitents would avail themselves of the practice more than once. The main difference that Source D had from Source C, Source B, and Source F was that he did not systematically promote private confession. Considering that difference, it is surprising that the four reported similar numbers of private confessions. This may illustrate the difficulty in promoting this practice. In these congregations, the years of instruction and promoting of the practice so far have not amounted to significantly

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51. See the section of interview findings “How Do You Teach/Encourage it?” below for more information on how these pastors brought their confirmations students through the rite of private confession.

more private confessions. Source C and Source B acknowledge this. They wonder if it must take a generation or more of teaching to change the culture and acceptance of the practice. It may be that promoting the practice has no significant effect on how often people come.

The three pastors who reported large numbers (in comparison to the other grouping) had ministries which are quite unique from one another. One of these men has been at his church for two years and reports hearing the private confessions of around 50 different people. He offers it by appointment and also during posted times every Saturday morning. He says that some Saturdays only one to two people come, but other Saturdays he has had up to 15 there to confess. They'll wait patiently in a line if they have to. Many of these people come to confession repeatedly. He also sees many interactions outside the parish as an opportunity for private confession; during a conversation in the grocery store parking lot, or with a handyman who comes to his home.

Another man has a very different experience from a parish pastor. In his 30 years as an institutional ministries chaplain, he estimates he has heard the private confessions of about 500 different people. Most of the people from whom he has heard confessions were in jail, prison, or an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) group. He says confession and absolution is a key step in the recovering process of an addict. Step five in the twelve-step AA program, often called the confession step (“[We] admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs”<sup>52</sup>) explicitly encourages confession and allows the chaplain to respond with absolution. His high numbers make sense due to the fact that the people with whom he works are often at a point when they are very willing to confess and be honest about their

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52. Alcoholics Anonymous, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, (New York: AA World Services, 2012), 55.

problems. In summary, institutional ministry's "whole ministry takes place within a culture of confession and absolution."<sup>53</sup>

Source G reported the most frequent occurrences of private confession and absolution. He estimated that he had heard the private confessions of somewhere between 500 and 600 different people, even though he has only been a pastor for 4 years. Also, he reckons that he hears someone's private confession almost every day of his ministry. There is a brief excursus offering explanations for this anomaly at the end of this section on question 4.

As for when private confessions happened within these pastors' ministries, it is all sorts of times. When I asked Professor Gurgel about when this generally happens in the WELS, he reported it happens most often within or at the end of a counseling session. That was the case most of the time in Source D's ministry and some of the time in Source A's, Source B's, and Source G's. Source D explains, "I don't meet with someone expecting private confession and absolution, but by the end of a counseling session, it's the right way to go."<sup>54</sup> Source C and Source B mention that since much of the time private confession results from counseling sessions, it is often because of a crisis situation. All the pastors interviewed were open to setting up an appointment for private confession upon a penitent's desire. Source D and Source G reported some people causally texting them and asking for it. Somewhat more interestingly, multiple pastors reported hearing people's private confessions after running into people in various places outside of church.<sup>55</sup> Lastly, most of the pastors would post times in their Sunday service folders and church calendars to advertise specific times people could come and confess.

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53. Source K, email with author, December 3, 2019.

54. Source D, conversation with author, September 25, 2019.

55. There will be more about this under the interview findings of question five.

Every pastor who posted times except Source A said that sometimes no one would come. Source A, who reported as little as two and as many as 15 people coming every Saturday morning, was the anomaly here.

There are some different opinions on whether or not to post times on the church calendar for private confession and absolution. Source C and Source A believe posting times is important to promote the practice while Source J said posted times would discourage people from availing themselves of it. Source C explained that posting times and having it on the schedule lets people know they don't need to ask for it. Instead of having to ask, they know the pastor is simply ready and willing to do it. He says, "Posting times is important, because people often are too shy to come uninvited."<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, Source J thought if anyone came during posted times it would communicate to whoever might witness this that the person confessing must have done something really bad. Without a culture of normalcy, Source J concluded that posting times could discourage people from coming.<sup>57</sup>

Four pastors mentioned that private confession has sometimes happened in their ministry with people who were not members of their churches. Source G is well known within his small rural town as the one Lutheran pastor, so people sometimes pull him aside when they see him and end up confessing. Source A sometimes wears his clerical collar while running errands, so he is easily identifiable as a man of God to the general public. He says some people he doesn't know will start telling him their life stories. He then asks them if they would like to get something bothering them off their chest. A confession will often result. If the person confesses

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56. Source C, conversation with author, October 17, 2019.

57. Source J also explained that he was a part of a big church with a secretary and another pastor. During posted times, a penitent would have had to walk past other people's offices. This would have told those people a person was going to confess.

something, he responds by asking their permission to speak words of forgiveness. He says these people usually respond well to this.

Source D mentioned the following story about a non-member who regularly confessed his sins in private. A man in his thirties who had been coming to this pastor's church for a couple months asked to meet the pastor one-on-one. They met at a coffee shop where he confessed the sins that bothered him. The pastor forgave him over a cup of coffee. Since that first meeting, the man has begun taking the membership class at the church and continues to meet privately with the pastor to confess and hear forgiveness. This story indicates that private confession and absolution with non-members could be viewed as a part of outreach and evangelism.

An analysis of the three pastors who have heard the most private confessions and absolved the most different people leads me to draw the following conclusions. A pastoral mindset that views every conversation with someone as an opportunity to hear a confession and absolve has had the biggest effect on raising the number of confessions heard. Source H says, "In our therapeutic culture, people are looking for therapy without admitting guilt." He lamented the fact that he often missed opportunities in his ministry (especially during counseling sessions) to lead people into what they really needed—private confession and absolution. This idea of viewing conversations as opportunities to personally forgive someone is prominent in all three of these high-traffic pastors' minds. Often with counseling sessions, one pastor catches himself trying to do talk therapy. He says, "I'm not going to banter back and forth for hours trying to do something I'm not trained to do. At some point in many pastoral care situations, you have to say, 'Are you ready to confess your sins?'"<sup>58</sup> Similarly, another sees his ministry saturated in

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58. Source A, conversation with author, October 22, 2019.

confession and absolution and another finds himself helping people confess their sins on a daily basis.

#### Excursus: The anomaly of Source G on the White Mountain Apache Reservation

Source G's experience with private confession and absolution is shockingly different than every other pastor I interviewed. He estimates he hears someone's confession and absolves that person nearly every day of his ministry. He estimates he has heard the confessions of somewhere between 500 and 600 different people, despite only being a pastor for little over four years. The number of different people he has privately absolved is about thirty-five times more than the average pastor I have interviewed.

Source G says that he does not post times available for private confession, simply because if he did, he would get swamped with people coming to confess. The scenarios he finds himself doing private confession in are extremely varied. If he is hearing confessions at church, he will do it in his office or in the sanctuary. Sometimes he uses a written rite from the hymnal, sometimes he doesn't. He has heard confessions on many people's deathbeds, during marriage counseling, when people were severely sick, and when they were in jail. He bumps into people on the sidewalk or runs into them while going to the store and before he knows it, a private confession and absolution results. His situation is so unique among those interviewed that it deserves an explanation.

Most notably, Source G is an Apache pastor among Apache people. Anthropologist Dr. William Kessel, who grew up on the White Mountain Apache Reservation and did his PhD thesis work there, offers five possible cultural explanations for why this pastor has heard so many more private confessions than every other pastor I interviewed. First, he says it could be a matter of

definition. Source G might see private confession and absolution in a broader sense than most pastors use the word, so he has counted more of them.

Second, Kessel says Source G's ministry setting is especially unique. Source G's church in Whiteriver, Arizona is on the White Mountain Apache Reservation. Kessel says the town's social problems are some of the worst in the United States of America. This would lend itself to ministers getting nearly flooded with people seeking help and forgiveness.

The third explanation is that the history and reputation of the WELS mission churches on the reservation (of which Source G is a part) is exemplary. Kessel observes that the Apache people generally do not move away from the place of their birth. Word gets passed down from generation to generation about the WELS mission churches. There's been a multigenerational display of love, concern, and competency over 125-plus years the WELS has had a presence there. The Apache people know this about the Lutherans on their land and recognize the pastors and missionaries are there, because they want to share the good news of forgiveness with them. "They know missionaries are there to serve and not to get or to take from the Indian."<sup>59</sup> Kessel says Source G has inherited this good reputation and is even more approachable, because he's not a white man, but a fellow Apache.

Fourth, Kessel points out that Source G has much shared life experience with the people he serves as pastor. He grew up in Whiteriver and is there to stay. The Apache people know that their pastor understands what they are going through, because he lives right off of the main street in downtown Whiteriver. They know he can see the drug deals go down at the basketball court across the street from his house. They know he lives in an environment where he experiences the

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59. William Kessel, conversation with author, November 9, 2019.

effects of the sins people are talking about. Therefore, a significant number of people trust him with their problems enough to confess to him.

Fifth, Kessel explains that the Apache's cultural mentality is different than the average white, western mentality. Apaches have always been group-oriented instead of individualistic. A person with an individualistic mindset thinks about his problem like this: "I got to get myself out of this." An Apache person with a collectivist mindset thinks about his problem like this: "I need someone else to help me get out of this." Apaches go to someone else or a group for help when they have problems. Kessel gives further insight into the difference of cultural mindsets when he says:

Apaches don't compartmentalize things like white people do. Apaches are wholistic. You can't separate your individual actions from group actions. A white person in a city can do whatever they want online (like porn) and go to work like nothing happens. Apaches know everyone else's business, it's small town rural. So when they have a problem, it is a problem for the family or community and that if it keeps going on, it's going to affect others.<sup>60</sup>

### **5. Where does it happen?**

Generally, pastors would either hear confessions in their office or in the sanctuary of their church, or both. The pastors who tend to hear confessions in the sanctuary tend to put a lot of thought into symbolism, ceremony, and ritual. Occasionally, confessions would be heard in various public places outside of pastors' churches (people's homes, in the streets, parking lots, etc.).

Source B, Source C, and Source A like to take people through the rite of private confession in the sanctuary, because they did not want the practice to feel like a counseling session. Source C explained that the practice is done in the sanctuary to remind the penitent that

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60. William Kessel, conversation with author, November 9, 2019.

the words coming from the pastor are not private counsel, but the words and forgiveness of Jesus. Source C says this way it is done in a place that is consecrated for God's use and where the word of God reigns. This atmosphere drives home Luther's words in his sample rite for the confessor to say to the penitent in his Small Catechism, "Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?"<sup>61</sup>

Source A was not dogmatic about doing it in the sanctuary, however. If the church's air conditioning or heating was not on, he said he would not hesitate to go through the rite in his office. Source D, on the other hand, would generally take people through the rite in his office, because most of the time when meeting with people he did not know it would end up with private confession and absolution. If private confession evolved out of a counseling session for Source C or Source F, they would actually leave their offices and take the person into the sanctuary. Source G said if someone scheduled an appointment with him, he would choose between doing it in his office or the sanctuary. He gave no rationale for choosing one or the other.

For the men who put thought into the ceremony and symbolism of doing the practice in the sanctuary, having the penitent facing the altar with the confessor seated facing perpendicular to the penitent was general practice. Source C, Source A, and Source F would all have their penitents do it that way with the penitent kneeling at the communion rail in the chancel. Source C explains that facing the altar reminds the penitent that the absolution is a gift from God. Having the confessor perpendicular to the penitent has the confessor's ear facing the penitent, which emphasizes the fact that the confessor is there only as a witness to God hearing the confession. Source B's practice was slightly different. He would have both penitent and himself

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61. SC V.

facing the altar, but they would sit on the front pews on opposite sides of the aisle. Lastly, Source A would have his penitents kneel in front of the baptismal font in order to show that confession and absolution is a way to live in one's baptism.

#### Excursus: Private confession and absolution offered at conferences

Within the last decade, private confession and absolution has been offered at various Lutheran conferences and conventions.

When WLS President Earle Treptow was the Nebraska District President of WELS, he said they would offer private confession to the attendees at their district conventions. Treptow said about 20 people would avail themselves of it at those times.

*Doxology: the Lutheran Center for Pastoral Care*, is an organization affiliated with the LCMS that provides continuing education for pastors. The organization seeks to develop advanced skills for pastoral care. *Doxology* has private confession and absolution as a specific focus and part of its curriculum. At its conferences, *Doxology* sets aside specific times for the practice.

At a LCMS Conference in St. Louis at which Source I preached, there was pastoral care offered by a number of pastors after the worship service. He reports that eighty percent of the worshipers who availed themselves of the pastoral care asked to privately confess and be absolved. There were so many people seeking pastoral care, people were waiting around patiently for an hour to make use of it.

Two youth conferences, *Higher Things* in the LCMS and *Return to Wittenberg* in the WELS, schedule time for it and encourage participants to avail themselves of it. On a side note, a presentation by Source C on private confession at *Return to Wittenberg* in 2016 is how I first

became interested in this thesis topic. I was one of many who availed themselves of individual confession and absolution at that conference.<sup>62</sup>

### **6. Do you vest? If so, how?**

The pastors are evenly split on this question. While Source D and Source G would never wear stoles to hear confession, Source F and Source B would sometimes put on a stole. Source C and Source A would nearly always be vested in a cassock, surplice, and stole. Source C would always wear a violet stole, because he said it is a penitential rite. Source A would put on the stole of whatever the current color of the church year was. If not anticipating private confession, Source C would take the person over to the sanctuary and quickly vest before going through the rite. However, he would not vest if he happened to hear confession outside the church. Source A made a point to say this about how he would vest: “I’m not saying everything I do is right. Everyone’s context will be a little different.”<sup>63</sup>

### **7. How do you communicate confidentiality? 7a. Do you hold to the confessional seal? 7b. Do you record this as a pastoral act? 7c. What do you do about mandatory reporting laws?**

Confidentiality is first communicated by the space chosen; all of the pastors take care that confession happens without the potential for bystanders to listen in. Many choose spaces that could be viewed (through windows). No pastors keep records of sins confessed, but Source C keeps records of parishioners who come to confess. Some (like Source J) recommend taking this

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62. At this conference, I experienced something I never thought I would. The conference organizers had set aside some time before the closing worship service for private confession and absolution. A problem arose when they got way more penitents than they bargained for. The line of people waiting to confess was so long that they had to postpone the worship service. All who wanted to privately confess and be absolved were able to.

63. Source A, conversation with author, October 22, 2019.

a step farther, with concern for both privacy and confidentiality, taking care not to alert others in the church building that the penitent is present for confession.

Sometimes confidentiality is verbally assured. Source C and Source G sometimes remind people that what is said during private confession would not be repeated. To communicate confidentiality, Source G says something like this: “This is between us. Nobody else needs to hear it.”<sup>64</sup> Source C sometimes explains that any private confessions of sins are not his to tell. He considers himself only a witness to confessions made to God.

Other times, confidentiality is assured by broader church practice. Source A doesn’t speak of confidentiality at all, because he thinks that would be assumed by the penitent. He says:

I never felt like I needed to [promise confidentiality]. I don’t think it’s a good idea. For one thing, the scriptures say that all men are liars, so I’d be setting myself up. Of course, I would never divulge a sin, and if I did, I’d be defrocked. I think it would create more doubt in the penitent if the pastor had to talk that way about his confidentiality. I’ve never even thought to say that. I think people generally recognize that there’s confidentiality.<sup>65</sup>

That is a unique sentiment among those interviewed. Two things might explain how Source A is able to say it. First, confidentiality is assumed in his LCMS church, because of the following vow all LCMS pastors make at their ordinations: “Will you promise never to divulge the sins confessed to you?”<sup>66</sup> Second, confession and absolution has been more normalized in his church (it gets mentioned frequently and multiple people show up every week for it at the posted times).

Regardless of context, the confessional seal is maintained by almost all pastors interviewed. One pastor states that he would uphold the confessional seal, unless obligated to act as a mandatory reporter. Source B, Source C, Source A, and Source F say that they would uphold

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64. Source G, conversation with author, October 29, 2019.

65. Source A, conversation with author, October 22, 2019.

66. *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda*, 1st edition (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 166.

the confessional seal no matter what. When questioned with a worst-case hypothetical situation involving ongoing criminal activity or abuse, they respond that they would press the penitent to confess to the police or the appropriate authorities. Consensus is found that someone who is truly repentant would be willing to accept earthly consequences. Source C speaks to the immense irony of confessing to God without confessing to the proper authorities:

I'm going to think that 99 times out of a 100 they're ready to deal with the consequence. You told God. Now you're not going to tell the police? Who are you more afraid of? That's the first commandment. So you got that playing too. This is the bigger thing. Telling the police is the smaller thing. 'But the police,' they say! 'They're the ones we're more afraid of. They'll take away my job and they'll throw me in jail.' God will only throw me in hell and I'm not as afraid of that, apparently.<sup>67</sup>

He continues by explaining that if someone does not want to come clean about sin, that is impenitence. The binding key could then be used, meaning that the confessional seal would no longer apply. In this case, mandated reporting would be a possible outcome.

### **8. What rite do you use, if any?**

If they were at church, nearly all the men would use a written form of the rite to take penitents through private confession and absolution. The exceptions to this are those in the *CrossTrain* program and institutional ministry. Pastors would not generally use a written rite for the practice if private confession happened unexpectedly or outside of the church.

Source C's rationale for using a written form for the practice is so that the penitent knows what is coming—forgiveness. A sure expectation of forgiveness, he says, is why people come. Source A explains that when the practice is impromptu, "we're thankful that it is in the hymnal, but we're not bound by that."<sup>68</sup>

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67. Source C, conversation with author, October 17, 2019.

68. Source A, conversation with author, October 22, 2019.

The men who use written rites differ on which they choose. They would use the rite found in the front part of their current Lutheran synod's hymnal, with a few exceptions. While Source A would use the form in *Lutheran Service Book*, Source D and Source G would use the form in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*. Source C would use the form found in Luther's original Small Catechism.<sup>69</sup> Source B would use his own amalgamation of different rites. Interestingly, Source F would use the rite for the general confession during his private confession sessions, since most of his people are more familiar with that (he would then prompt the penitent to confess specific things after reading the general confession).

### **9. What extra encouragement do you offer after the absolution?**

When asked this question, Source C said, "That's exactly what I would like to know!"<sup>70</sup> In saying this, he emphasizes the challenge and complexity of what to say in order to help and comfort a broken sinner. Source A and Source B acknowledge this challenge. Source A mentions that some of this takes a lot of prayer and practice to get good at. Source B says the answer is "decades of being a theologian of the cross."<sup>71</sup> According to Source F, what a pastor says to a penitent can have such an impact that it is not uncommon for a penitent to crumple to his/her knees in relief. The following findings will hopefully give more insight into the worthy challenge of comforting a penitent.

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69. The recent WELS Small Catechisms do not include the form of Luther's example rite for private confession and absolution, but one can find this by looking at SC V in a Book of Concord.

70. Source C, conversation with author, October 17, 2019.

71. Source B, conversation with author, October 8, 2019.

Thoughts on what to say after the words of absolution ranged from extra words of forgiveness, to miniature gospel sermons, to advice for daily living. All the pastors would tailor any extra encouragement to the needs of the individual. The view of most of the pastors was that the extra encouragement could include not only extra gospel, but also helpful advice for living in forgiveness and producing fruits of repentance. Source A's philosophy, however, is to only offer gospel encouragement within the confessional. He is adamant that words of advice/direction are ideally given as part of broader pastoral care and not done within a session of individual absolution. He would never speak advice for daily living during the rite itself (especially not at the rail before the altar). Although, if a penitent needed more pastoral care after the individual absolution, he would sit down and talk with the person after the ritual was complete. There, he would not hesitate to "provide encouragement toward things that someone can do to avoid satanic assault and things that are ruining their lives."<sup>72</sup> Despite the differences in what is acceptable to include after the absolution, the overwhelming consensus of the men is that whatever is said should by no means undo the complete comfort of the absolution.

The forms of gospel encouragement vary among the men. The most common place from which the men mention taking gospel encouragement is the Psalms (such as 32, 51, and 103). A couple of the men would apply gospel from a recent Bible text they had studied (especially the appointed lectionary Gospel reading for the week). If he were applying comfort from one of the four Gospels, one pastor would usually explain to the penitent how a specific area of Jesus' obedience is credited to him/her by faith (for instance, if someone were struggling with chastity he would talk about Jesus' perfect chastity and apply it). Another pastor makes it his general practice not to specifically mention any sins confessed, because they had already been dealt with

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72. Source A, conversation with author, October 22, 2019.

and taken away. Source D spoke of an “afterglow,”<sup>73</sup> where he would let the penitent contemplate the peace he/she had from the forgiveness of sins. On the other hand, Source K would like to impress upon the addicts and inmates with whom he met that, in Christ, they were way more than the sum of their sins. Source A sums up the goal of this extra gospel encouragement well when he says, “Ideally you want them leaving dripping wet in their baptism, drenched in the blood of Christ.”<sup>74</sup>

Two pastors offered suggestions of things to teach the penitent to better understand the peace in Jesus’ forgiveness. Source E suggests pastors to ask themselves, “What biblical truth might I share that might counteract the lie or emotion that Satan is still trying to bind their conscience with?”<sup>75</sup> Source J brought up a challenging scenario that might need to be dealt with. Sometimes, people confess things that are not actually sins and for which they did not need to feel guilty. In those situations, he says guilty consciences need to be forgiven no matter what, even if they are mistakenly guilty. After that pronouncement of forgiveness, a confessor could then teach that going forward there would not be any need to feel guilty about that particular thing which is not a sin.

A couple of the men would utilize the laying on of hands as an additional way to communicate God’s love to their penitents in a personal way. This would be done during the initial absolution and may or may not include the sign of the cross traced upon the penitent’s forehead.

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73. Source D, conversation with author, September 25, 2019.

74. Source A, conversation with author, October 22, 2019.

75. Source E, conversation with author, October 11, 2019.

Those of the men who would give advice and direction after the absolution to appropriately live a new life are careful not to make the absolution conditional on the advice they give. Source C says he would sometimes liken his advice given to what a father would advise his own son. He would say: “Can I give you my advice as a spiritual father? I say this, not the Lord, as someone who cares about you.”<sup>76</sup> Most of the pastors would help the penitent draw a connection between their forgiveness and the new life God expects them to live. Pastors like Sources G and K who deal with many alcoholics and other addicts would give hope for them to do better and direct them into addiction recovery programs.

### **10. How do you teach/encourage it?**

Sources A, B, and E agree that the most basic way to explain how private absolution works is that a minister pronouncing forgiveness is a “conduit”<sup>77</sup> for the gospel. Source A stresses that when pastors uphold this gift, they should avoid clericalism. Anyone can speak the absolution and not just the pastor. Source B points out that there are different avenues through the means of grace to be forgiven. Private absolution is only one of those avenues. This is why Source B says a pastor needs to be very careful of unintentionally implying that one is not forgiven unless coming to private confession and absolution. He says that it is easier for a pastor just to not even bring up confession and absolution than to deal with people misunderstanding it as a law.

The question is: “why for generations did we read in the confessions that it would be an abominable thing to let go and nobody was willing to do it?” It’s because it’s hard to have these conversations. The threat of thinking that somebody is going to think that they’re better because they gave a confession was a good enough excuse not to do it. I’m guilty of that. It took me eight years to get the guts to tackle it.<sup>78</sup>

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76. Source C, conversation with author, October 17, 2019.

77. Source E, conversation with author, September 24, 2019.

78. Source B, conversation with author, October 8, 2019.

Source B and others overcame this fear and began teaching this practice as described below.

Source C gives a simple way to teach the practice. Pastors can teach it by opening up to the Fifth Chief Part of Luther's Small Catechism, the section devoted to teaching private confession and absolution. He says, "It is not what you see in movies, not what Roman Catholics do, but it is what our Lutheran catechism says."<sup>79</sup> However, he says the catechism works best if it is an edition/version that includes Luther's brief form of confession (an example written rite). The other main place to which he points his students is John's Gospel, where Jesus instituted absolution. "Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven,'" (John 20:21–23, NIV).

The other way Sources C and A stress to use the Small Catechism is to teach people to use the Ten Commandments as a sort of spiritual diagnostic, or confessional mirror. By examining one's life according to these laws, one finds sins to confess to God, his neighbor, or his pastor.

The Small Catechism is not the only way confirmation students learn the practice. Sources A, B, and C would all have their students go through an actual private confession and absolution session with them. Although Sources B and C never had any confirmands come back for private confession of their own volition, they saw it as planting seeds. They thought if these newly confirmed members ever needed to confess in their future, they would be more inclined to

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79. Source C, conversation with author, October 17, 2019.

come if they needed it. The practice would not feel as awkward or nerve-wracking to them, since they would have already done it once.

All three of those men mentioned what Melanchthon writes as part of their rationale for taking their confirmation students through the rite before they would take communion.

Melanchthon writes that “the Sacrament is offered to those who wish to use it, after they have been examined and absolved.”<sup>80</sup> Source B would also cite the numerous times in the Book of Concord that private absolution is mentioned as the third sacrament as rationale for teaching his students that it is the third sacrament (after baptism and holy communion).

Five of the men say they teach the practice during adult Bible studies. Some would devote an entire series to the topic. Source C says it is also very easy to bring up during a study of any of the Confessions in the Book of Concord. Other men (Sources G and A) would put special emphasis on it during Bible information class/membership class. Source A says teaching this to new members is key for retaining the practice. New members do not necessarily have the “that’s too catholic” sentiment about the practice that many life-long Lutherans do. He said he would take any new members through the rite (just as with his confirmation students) as a way to help prepare them to receive holy communion.

To help students understand the need for private confession and absolution, pastors would use various Bible texts. Source C would use the penitential psalms (Psalm 51, 32, and 38 were specifically mentioned) and the story of the prophet Nathan confronting King David to get him to privately confess and be absolved (2 Samuel 12). These Bible texts are used to illustrate the consequence of keeping silent about sin. Through these Bible passages, Source C says that

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80. Ap XXIV.1.

pastors can teach people to hunger and thirst for the word of forgiveness just like they teach people to hunger and thirst for holy communion.

Another way a few of the men taught the need for the practice was through counseling sessions with members. The men expressed that the problems that lead people to counseling can often be avoided, remedied, and solved by regularly confessing their sins. Pastors can stress that God wants people to confess to the people they have wronged, to God, and to and their pastor. Source A gave an illustration of what this might look like during marriage counseling. He says, “If I’m dealing with a couple whose marriage is on the rocks, at some point I’m going to say, ‘I’ve heard about the shortcomings of the other person. I’m not interested in that anymore. How are you sinning against the other person and your marriage?’”<sup>81</sup>

Source C explains that when somebody comes for counseling or confession about a big crisis situation, he uses that as an opportunity to urge them to make use of this practice more regularly. He emphasizes that Luther intended private confession to be a regular thing and not a rarity, because the examples of sin Luther includes in his example of private confession in the Small Catechism has only regular everyday sins. Source C says:

In those kind of circumstances (crisis counseling sessions), the person isn’t coming in and confessing, “Oh, I once cursed or I oversold goods.” They’re confessing that they have a porn habit or that they embezzled funds. They’re bigger things typically or they’re causing trouble in life, the kind of things that Luther gives us as a sample are garden variety sins. They’re everyday sort of things.<sup>82</sup>

Source C continues with an illustration that shows how unfortunate it is that so many Lutherans today only use counseling or private confession during a time of a crisis.

I guess in some ways it’s like a person who goes only to the doctor and the only doctor they see is in the E.R. Generally, the E.R. doctor has to deal with more life-threatening

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81. Source A, conversation with author, October 22, 2019.

82. Source C, conversation with author, October 17, 2019.

things. But the E.R. doc is going to say, “You know you need to follow up with your primary care physician. If you were being seen regularly, this probably wouldn’t have happened. Also, you wouldn’t have to spend so much money by going to the E.R., because you could’ve just called up your doc.”<sup>83</sup>

He teaches it this way, because he sees private confession and absolution ideally as regular and preventative care. He does not want to only be an E.R. pastor, but a primary and regular care pastor. He wants his parishioners to receive regular care and forgiveness.

Another way pastors teach this practice is to distinguish the general confession in public worship from private confession. None of the men discourage the use of the general confession, but they point out how each type of confession serves a unique purpose. For example, Source C would put notes in the margins of some of his service folders. The notes would explain that the general confession and absolution is not intended to replace the private form of the practice; both are to be utilized. Source B would explain to his parishioners an unfortunate misunderstanding that could arise by hearing only the general absolution and not individual absolution.

I would say, “Listen, you know, we do this general absolution. That’s great, but I’m smart enough and you’re smart enough to know that there are people out there who say, ‘if pastor knew what I did last night he wouldn’t have said that to me.’ It is a whole different story when you’re standing in my office or the quote/unquote confessional and you say, ‘I had an abortion twenty years ago or I slept with somebody last night,’ and I still forgive you, that’s powerful stuff.”<sup>84</sup>

By this, he does not mean that an individual absolution is more powerful or gives more forgiveness, but he means that the forgiveness is applied in a more personal way. Source D looks at the distinction between the two from a different angle. He says that once somebody privately confesses and is absolved, a pastor can then teach how that experience can make the general confession more meaningful. Instead of merely reading aloud the general written confession

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83. Source C, conversation with author, October 17, 2019.

84. Source B, conversation with author, October 8, 2019.

without much thought, one can remember how he private confessed to the pastor and, similarly, remind himself he is not just reading words but actually confessing sins to God. He might even have specific sins in his mind to confess to God while reading or meditating on the general confession.

Two men (Sources A and C) proposed including corporate confession and absolution in some of their public worship services. By this, they mean a sort of mix between general and private confession. Basically, the congregation would say a general confession, but then line up like they were going to communion. No one would be forced to get up, but those who do come forward at the direction of ushers to receive an individual absolution from the pastor. When absolving, the pastor could also lay a hand on the forehead of the penitent and say the person's name. When Source C did this at his church during the Maundy Thursday service of 2019, he was shocked that about eighty percent of the worshippers present came forward. So many came forward that it took nearly a half hour to absolve everyone (longer than the communion distribution took later on in that service). Both men found that those who chose to be individually absolved valued it highly. Source A commented that most Lutherans have gone their whole life without any Christian getting their hands on them and pronouncing forgiveness of sins to them, so when it happens it can be a profound experience. Source A reflects on how people have reacted: "As Lutherans, we don't put a lot of stock in how people react emotionally, but people tend to split like a melon. A lot of people end up weeping." As for when to do this, the men recommended Maundy (Holy) Thursday and New Year's Eve. They both hoped that by these individual absolutions people would experience the absolution in a very personal way and realize also what a blessing private confession could be for them.

Three men mention that they speak about the practice in sermons. Source E gives the following advice on how to teach a culture of confessing sins. He says when a pastor's sermons show how powerful the word is in people's lives and when the sermons show grace and not guilt, a safer environment is created. Also, how a pastor presents himself and his own heart has a lot to do with people being comfortable enough to confess to him. Source A thinks confession and absolution would be a good idea for a Reformation festival sermon. He explains that the whole debate about the penitential system was the backdrop of the Reformation. The heart of Luther's original debate was the abuse of the penitential system and how people were not being comforted by an absolution, but by doing penance.

Source A hopes that fifty years from now, by continued teaching and encouragement, private confession would be generally understood as a good Lutheran thing and not "popish."<sup>85</sup> Since he believes it will take a considerable number of years to change the general Lutheran attitude about this practice, Source A says all pastors can do is teach it faithfully and then hand off the baton to the next pastor.

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85. Source A, conversation with author, October 22, 2019.

## PART V: PASTORS' TAKEAWAYS

### 11. What benefit do people see from it?

Pastors report that those who did confess to them generally saw it as a beneficial experience.

Three men specifically report their penitents felt relief from guilt. Source G says a majority feel like a burden has been lifted. Source I says that since people are under barrage in this counter-Christian environment (with its individualism, emphasis on ego, political correctness, their own sins, and the sins against them that have led them to sin in return), people value this personal care to relieve their guilt. Agreeing with that same sentiment, Source A says, “We are under constant demonic assault and war and this is the living word of God applied against it. It is a great thing to hear that your sins are not too great for God.”<sup>86</sup> Source B expresses that “pastorally, I'm concerned about the person. And I know this. People come up to me and say, ‘You know what? I had an abortion 15 years ago and I don't believe I'm forgiven.’ For me to say, ‘that sin, right there, is forgiven,’ is huge.”<sup>87</sup>

Generally, the men report that people value hearing forgiveness in a different and personal way. Source B notes that although there are other avenues for forgiveness, it is nice to hear a personal absolution repeatedly. He says, “You're forgiven if you're baptized. Period. End of story, you know? Full stop. But it sure is nice to hear it again.”<sup>88</sup>

The practice was noted as a helpful tool for a Christian to live a healthy, repentant life.

Source B says:

We're not just talking about, “Oh, let's keep confession and absolution because we're theology nerds.” I'm talking about people's lives here. I'm talking about maybe they don't

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86. Source A, conversation with author, October 22, 2019.

87. Source B, conversation with author, October 8, 2019.

88. Source B, conversation with author, October 8, 2019.

get in as many spats in their marriages as they would have, because they are in the practice of actually saying they're sorry. Actually being forgiven. That's going to make them more apt to be forgiving to other people. It is the gospel that changes that heart.<sup>89</sup>

Lastly, Source F mentioned the practice has helped people discern about what they should actually feel guilty about. During the confession or in the brief encouragement after the absolution, a confessor can teach a penitent how better to examine himself.

### **12. What has worked to promote this and what has not?**

Source A was the only one who had much to say on this. First off, he says it is easy to improve on this, since the practice is hardly taught and is in such disuse. Just talking about the practice and mentioning that it is the Firth Chief Part of Luther's Small Catechism is an improvement. Secondly, he says what does not work is any kind of self-righteous discourse such as suggesting that those who do not confess are not truly Lutheran or ignorant.

### **13. What is this practice's niche in society?**

The men see that this practice has a unique place within our current culture and a special role within pastoral care. Five Sources (A, B, F, H, and K) mention that those in the United States of America live in a culture of therapy. Source B points out that people today really value the idea of therapy and improving themselves. He often observes that both laypeople see pastors as therapists and pastors see themselves as therapists. However, Source B is adamant that pastors ought to change the mindset that they are therapists who are going to fix people's problems. With a therapy mindset, pastors hear people's problems and wonder how to make them happy, but what they need more than happiness is forgiveness. Despite this often-overemphasized

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89. Source B, conversation with author, October 8, 2019.

therapy mindset, Source K and B say it could be used for a pastor's advantage with private confession.

Source B says, "As Pastors we don't look at our people as sinners in need of reform, but as someone who needs to be killed and resurrected on a daily basis. Confession and absolution is the death and resurrection. It's not trying to reform the sinner, but trying to kill him. The irony of it all is, when you look back on it, it's pretty darn good therapy."<sup>90</sup> What he means is that private confession is not what most people think of as therapy, but it is therapeutic as part of a healthy repentant life of a Christian.

Source K says that Alcoholics Anonymous has figured the basics of why private confession can be therapeutic. They understand it is therapeutic to say out loud the bad truth about oneself in the presence of another who does not hold that against them. Source K states that people give little time for self-reflection of how they are doing according to their various vocations. He says that private confession is one way they can do that deep thinking for the wellbeing of their mind and soul.

Furthermore, Sources A, B, and F think promoting private confession and absolution could help change people's view of their pastor as a therapist/counselor to someone who speaks God's word and lifts burdens. Now, although all of these men know there is a time and place for a pastor to do counseling, they emphasize that that is not their primary role. Source A says, generally, pastors are trained to forgive in pastoral care, not counsel. "As Lutherans we're law/gospel people,"<sup>91</sup> he says. What that means for him is he often redirects a person expecting therapy to what he does know how to do—hear confession and forgive sins. Source A also thinks

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90. Source B, conversation with author, October 8, 2019.

91. Source A, conversation with author, October 22, 2019.

that promoting more private confession and absolution is returning pastoral care to a more historic Lutheran practice. He sees pastoral counseling in the sixteenth Century as consisting mostly of private confession. To him, Lutherans pastors today seem to be the weird ones compared to their historical counterparts, because they tend to do more counseling than private absolving.

One other niche Source B sees this practice has in our culture has to deal with the forensic nature of absolution. The Western world favors the forensic metaphor for forgiveness. “That is absolution at its finest,”<sup>92</sup> Source B says. While some cultures might favor gospel metaphors like honor versus shame or fear versus power, the United States’ very litigious society loves to hear declarations of forgiveness.

Men also saw this practice play special roles in pastoral care. Source B explains that God has given Christians a wide variety of the means of grace and that each one carries with it different metaphors and connotations. For instance, he says baptism is cleansing, the Lord’s Supper is medicinal, and absolution is acquittal. “They’re all equally valuable and they’re all equally right. We can’t pick and choose the means of grace. We can’t ignore this thing [private confession and absolution] that has been beneficial for many years and in various places and cultures.”<sup>93</sup>

Source C, on the other hand, sees one of its roles as making pastors better pastors. He says after hearing confessions and absolving, he is better able to give pastoral care to penitents in the future. “It makes you closer to them, more sympathetic to them. It makes me a better pastor. They tell me what they would never tell me in a home visit...I try to forget [the specific sins] but

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92. Source B, conversation with author, October 8, 2019.

93. Source B, conversation with author, October 8, 2019.

I don't forget that they're under my care. It endears them to me."<sup>94</sup> He says hearing confessions also makes him a better preacher. Even if he does not mention the specific sins confessed to him, he knows well the types of things with which his members are struggling. That way, he can more easily apply law. Also, since he has already comforted consciences of such types of sins with the gospel before, he can more easily preach the gospel.

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94. Source C, conversation with author, October 17, 2019.

## CONCLUSION

How are confessional Lutheran pastors using this practice? Most of those interviewed for this paper are confessing to another pastor or minister for their own spiritual wellbeing. Many want to use it more regularly in pastoral care, despite its current general state of disuse.

Further research could explore the perspective of the many Lutheran pastors who do not avail themselves of private confession or actively promote it in their congregations. Questions remain about the majority perspective on private confession in confessional Lutheranism. Is it seen as valuable, but difficult to implement? Is it not valued? Are other practices or priorities overshadowing its use? Such questions were not the focus of this paper as all interviewees were chosen on the basis of their ability to discuss the implementation of the practice, not its disuse in their ministries.

Is this practice worth all the effort to revive and promote? The pastors interviewed and I believe so. It remains worthwhile most simply because the absolution proclaims Jesus' forgiveness which sinners will always need. A couple other main worthwhile reasons follow from that. First, the practice might serve as a way to help people struggling with shameful addictions find comfort and freedom. Pastors who hear such confessions can direct their penitents to the appropriate recovery programs. Second, keeping it as a regular form of pastoral care distinguishable from counseling lets pastors do what they are extensively trained and divinely called to do: apply law and gospel to aid people in their lives of repentance. The practice seems to have a niche in the current therapeutic culture as a form of "baptismal therapy."<sup>95</sup> If used regularly or occasionally as needed, the process of confessing one's sins and receiving absolution can be seen as spiritual healing for hurting sinners.

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95. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*, 186–187.

Repentance as regular part of Christian life starts with confession before God and confession to others in our lives whom we have wronged. However, example after example show that when the conscience cannot find peace, people need to know that pastors are ready and willing to hear their confessions and absolve their sins. Many people do not currently know that this opportunity for certain forgiveness exists. They miss out on the peace they would gain from this type of very personal pastoral care.

As far as what works to teach and encourage it, nothing yet seems to immediately increase the number of those who seek the practice out. The most common and simple way to teach it involves using the text of the Fifth Chief Part of Luther's Small Catechism. Other common methods for promoting it include instructing children through confirmation, new members through Bible information class, and current members through regular Bible study and preaching. The generally low numbers of people availing themselves of this remains puzzling especially in churches that have put considerable time into teaching it. Pastors should not be too quickly discouraged if promoting this practice only results in a few individual absolutions. It may take a generation of instruction, a more unified synod-wide or district-wide emphasis, or some other solution for a significant change in attitude. It is yet to be seen how to normalize the practice on a wide scale.

Another option for future research could be a longitudinal study regarding the promotion of this practice. Differences in long-term outcomes comparing different styles of offering and promoting private confession could be useful, since many current efforts have not shown significant changes thus far.

Private confession and absolution, like all gifts of God, is just that: a gift. It is not an act that people do that sets them apart as more devout or better Christians, but just another gift given

by God to comfort his people's guilty consciences. Dr. Senkbeil describes the freedom found in this powerful gift:

I've witnessed people freed from the chains of sins they had begun to believe were so grievous they could never be forgiven...One would think that such unearthly power [that of the Keys] would go to one's head. But there is nothing more awe-inspiring than to deliver souls from bondage and free them from the oppression of sins they know and feel in their heart—to live once more in the freedom and joy that comes from a clean conscience, confident that by my absolution their sins were removed from them as far as the east is from the west. Of course though I was speaking the absolution, the forgiveness was not my own. That's the whole point of the sacrament of holy absolution—that Jesus forgives sins through the mouth of his called servants, putting his life-giving word on human lips to speak into the ears of another human soul so that soul can find comfort and solace not in the pastor, but in Christ.<sup>96</sup>

God grant that we regularly come to find and offer that peace.

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96. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*, 103.

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