

# **An Examination of Current Practices Pertaining to the Call and Public Ministry**

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## **Progression of Thought**

### **Practices Related to Issuing and Deliberating on a Call**

- Do we consistently insist on the qualifications listed in Scripture?
  - Do we trust the Holy Spirit to identify the person to be called?
  - Is there anything wrong with seeking or interviewing for a call?
- While holding a call are we content with information normally provided?

### **Practices Related to Terminating a Call**

- Do we still consider most calls permanent?
- Have we expanded acceptable reasons for terminating a call?

### **Practices Related to the Term “Ministry”**

- Should we limit the term “ministry” to direct uses of the gospel?
- Are we blurring distinctions between public ministry and the work of all believers?

**Appendix 1:** Sample Letter to Accompany a Pastor Call

**Appendix 2:** Needs Assessment Form used by our District President

Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God” (1 Pe 2:16). Freedom and flexibility are to be accompanied by good judgment, sound thinking, love, and a desire to serve. As I understand it, your request for this paper flows from a desire to discuss and be assured that these biblical principles are being applied among us in the matter of the call into the public ministry. Procedurally, our God has given us a large degree of freedom in the practice of issuing, deliberating on, and terminating public ministry calls. But, of course, he has not granted us absolute freedom. He has subjected our practices to certain revealed truths as well as the overarching virtue of love with the desire to serve and edify his people. We are to live and treat all aspects of the call “as free men” and “as servants of God” at the same time. The progression of thought in this presentation will be first of all to affirm the fact that we, as church, possess the responsibility and privilege to call public ministers of the gospel in God’s name. Then we shall deal with prominent questions being asked in our midst concerning the practice of extending, considering, and terminating calls to public ministry. Finally, we shall briefly address the issue of using adequate terminology regarding the public ministry.

Concerning the right or freedom of the church to call public ministers, we acknowledge the legitimacy of saying that public ministers are both “called by God” and “called by fellow believers (the church).” As the title indicates, these ministers are servants—servants of Christ and Christ’s people. To the same people Paul wrote, “Men ought to regard us *as servants of Christ*” and “We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as *your servants* for Jesus’ sake” (1 Cor 4:1, 2, Cor 4:5). To maintain a proper biblical balance in our phraseology, we strive to choose words that say public ministers are called *by God through the Church*.

Prior to Christ's ascension, God usually called and designated his servants "immediately" or directly, as typified by the call of Moses (Ex 3), Isaiah (Is 6) and the Twelve (Mk 1:16-19, 2:14, etc.) Less frequently he called "mediately" through human agents, as in the calling of Elisha through Elijah (1 Kgs 19:19-21). After the Lord's ascension, however, the calling of people into the public ministry was done mediate through the believers (with the notable exception of St. Paul). We freely admit that the shift from direct to mediate calling is nowhere declared in so many words in Scripture. It simply happened at the time of the apostolic Church and the New Testament records the fact. Nothing in the subsequent history of the church has led us to think otherwise.

Procedurally, the calling of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot (Ac 1) and the call of the Seven to wait on tables (Ac 6) are examples or patterns that have been largely duplicated by subsequent generations of believers. Regarding these two events, it has been well said, "A careful reader will note no command, no prescription which we are required to follow, though the same careful reader will note similarities in the procedures we use today."<sup>1</sup> Other New Testament examples of mediate calling would include the appointment (or election<sup>2</sup>) of elders among the Galatian believers (Ac 14:23), the selection of the brother by the churches to accompany the apostles carrying the offering (2 Cor 8:19), and the appointment of elders among the Cretan believers (Tt 1:5). It is noteworthy that we are not told in detail *how* believers went about calling or selecting representative ministers and are certainly not commanded to call public ministers in any particular manner. What is given to us as methodology in the apostolic church is primarily *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. Procedural flexibility and freedom is a dominant characteristic of God's calling of public ministers through the church. To a large degree, it is enough for us to know that the Lord is with two or more who gather in his name, and that they are authorized and equipped to attend to gospel ministry issues. God's active participation in our calling procedures is an article of faith, believed because of promises and declarations given in Scripture. This confidence is not based on any mandated methodology.

As stated above, however, we note that the church's freedom in extending calls is not absolute. The Scriptures clearly address the issue of *qualifications* that public ministers are to possess. With this in mind, we approach the first major question listed for our examination at this time:

### **Do we consistently insist on the qualifications listed in Scripture?**

The scope of this essay and the time allotted for its presentation and discussion prohibit a thorough treatment of the qualifications provided in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and elsewhere in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> It has been observed that characteristics required of these public ministers parallel those expected in the life of every believer. It is also noteworthy that the emphasis is clearly on *character* rather than proficiency or talent (the sole skill being an ability to teach, being διδακτικός). Further, all of the traits are mentioned as necessary, not some more than others. The manner in which the qualifications are listed in 1 Timothy and Titus, moreover, leads us to consider three of the characteristics as "primary," with the other qualities illustrative of these more broad virtues. The overseer/elder/deacon must be ἀνεπίλημπος (one who "cannot be taken hold of," that is, unassailable, beyond criticism, NIV—"above reproach") σεμνός, ("venerable," honorable: NIV—"worthy of respect"), and ἀνέγκλητος (one who "cannot be called into account," irreproachable; NIV—"blameless").

When it is asked if we consistently insist on the biblical qualifications, there is the suggestion that it is not so. Some may be asking if our college and seminary, in recommending candidates, or if our Assignment

<sup>1</sup> Richard Lauersdorf, "The Doctrine of the Call, with Special Reference to the Question of Its Permanence Under Changed Circumstances." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Fall, 1989, p. 270.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek verb used here, χειροτονειν, pictures selection by a show of hands and may indicate the elders were "appointed" by election among the people. Hence the NIV footnotes.

<sup>3</sup> It is wise periodically to remind ourselves that these frequently cited sections are not all-inclusive in providing desirable or required characteristics for leaders in the church. Other sections of the Pastoral Epistles give valuable reminders on the character and conduct of gospel ministers. So do equally familiar passages such as 1 Cor 4:2 and 1 Pe 5:3, among others. It is also observed that, prior to any explicit precept, when the early church called Matthias and the Seven, they required that candidates for the offices be subjected to certain qualifications (Ac 1:21-22, 6:3).

Committee, in assigning candidates, are insistent enough in these matters. More are probably asking if the Conference of Presidents are consistent enough dealing with those who seek to remain in the ministry or reenter the ministry following an event that has seemingly signaled their disqualification for the office. While differences of opinion will almost inevitably prevail in hypothetical discussions of this nature, we can state at least three major points to be remembered when we examine our practice.

1. It can be difficult to determine just how “venerable, blameless, or above reproach” a public minister must be, since these are relative terms when used to describe people’s relationship to other people. Professor David Valleskey issues this reminder: “[I]n the eyes of man (both the church and the world) a person will always be at best *relatively* ἀνεπίλημπος and ἀνέγκλητος. It would depend, it seems upon at least two factors: how public the sin is and the nature of the sin. There is, of course, a close connection between the two. In general, the more gross the nature of the sin, the more widespread will be the reports of it.”<sup>4</sup> All this is to say that, to some degree, there is a subjective element in judging whether or not a person possesses the qualifications in the eyes of other people.

This is not said, and dare not be said, to deny a certain objectivity of standards set down in Scripture. And obviously these biblical sections assume that such a determination can be made and the personal qualities affirmed or denied. Still, assuming the gift of repentance in all cases, some sins are simply more public, high profile, and thus more apt to disqualify a called worker than others sins might. Some sins are likewise adjudged by people in and outside the Church to be more indicative of untrustworthiness and a lack of integrity than other transgressions are. These realities should give one pause when tempted to be critical of those who strive to apply the scriptural standards consistently.<sup>5</sup>

2. Especially in cases when a person may seek to reenter the public ministry after having been disqualified for cause, it is important to note that the person’s *current* character in the eyes of other people is the primary issue. On this specific point Professor Valleskey supplies exegetical reminders worth recalling: “[I]t is important to consider the Greek words δεῖ and ἐστίν: δεῖ... τὸν ἐπίσκοπον ἀνεπίλημπον εἶναι (1 Tim 3:2); εἰ τις ἐστίν ἀνέγκλητος (Ti 1:6); δεῖ... τὸν ἐπίσκοπον ἀνέγκλητον εἶναι (Ti 1:7). Note that they are present tenses. The question is not: ‘Did this person at one time fail to fit the general qualification of being ἀνεπίλημπος and ἀνέγκλητος?’ The question is: ‘Is the person at the present time ἀνεπίλημπος and ἀνέγκλητος?’”<sup>6</sup>

Some have rather strongly voiced the opinion and desire that once a person has been judged to lack the qualifications, he should be permanently barred from the office. The position taken in our Seminary’s pastoral theology textbook does not go that far. It admits that a pastor who has forfeited his good reputation may be barred from future service “more often than not.” It also acknowledges that such a person will “seldom” be able to continue to serve in the same place where the offense had occurred.<sup>7</sup> But the words used obviously refrain from making hard and fast rules that forbid reentry into the public ministry. As these matters are discussed among us, we will want to avoid requiring more than Scripture requires.

3. Evangelical practice, on the part of educators and district presidents no less than parish pastors, can appear “inconsistent and inadequate” to observers. Every pastor knows how he lays himself open to criticism by hearing people out, often behind closed doors, and making decisions based on information not commonly or accurately known to others. Are district presidents, who serve in a real way as pastors of other public ministers, much different? One may point to the maxim that “public sins are to be

<sup>4</sup> David J. Valleskey, *The Pastor Must Be Above Reproach*, p. 8. This essay grew out of an oral presentation to the Conference of Presidents, was only quite recently written as an essay, and is scheduled to be printed in an upcoming issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*.

<sup>5</sup> Professor Valleskey, in the essay previously cited, does supply a few examples to illustrate this point. Our limited time here and now keeps us from doing the same. The Conference may be wise in scheduling time on subsequent agendas for follow-up discussion.

<sup>6</sup> David J. Valleskey, *The Pastor Must Be Above Reproach*, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Armin Schuetze and Irwin Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ*, p. 47.

rebuked [and clarified, fully exposed?] publicly,” and thus the failings of public ministers should be dealt with differently. Perhaps to a degree this has application, but one can also think of many scenarios in which it has limited validity in view of the biblical emphasis on confidentiality and the preservation of the neighbor’s reputation whenever possible. We want those charged with responsibility in these matters to disclose every bit of information that would prove helpful, but not one bit of information that would be harmful. That is not an easy assignment. Again, the main lesson of this reminder is that we resolve to be cautious, “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” when pondering appropriate procedure.

4. There are times when we must admit our limitations and entrust the matter to the Lord. To use the imagery provided in 1 Corinthians 3, we may be personally convinced that inferior building materials are being employed in kingdom work and decision-making. We also may have to be patient, knowing that the other person’s “work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light” (1 Co 3:13). It strikes us a quite likely that congregations or offending public ministers, for their own reasons and according to their own lights, have gone against the advice and desires of district presidents in such matters. The Conference of Presidents has limited authority in imposing its will on the brotherhood. Moreover, it does not strike me as beyond the realm of possibility that a district president has erred in his judgment due to friendship with—or an aversion to—a certain fellow public minister. That’s why I am to keep them in my prayers, and why I am to entrust all things ultimately to my Lord. To assume that the bond of Christian, or confessional, fellowship has thus been severed, or to think that I therefore have a right to criticize authorities harshly, however, is wrongheaded and out of order.

The second question posed for examination and discussion assumes that qualified candidates for public ministry have been identified and focuses more on the calling procedures employed to extend a call to the person.

### **Do we trust the Holy Spirit to identify the person to be called?**

Our stated desire and intention at “call meetings” is to have the Holy Spirit lead the participants to identify and extend a call to the one God wants called at that time and for his purpose. Why would this be questioned or doubted? As I understand it, the impetus behind this has a lot to do with the increased use of educational, professional, and peer appraisal information that is commonly gathered and disclosed to calling bodies in our synod. The background data, including some self-appraisal information, that is gathered and used is perhaps more prevalent in the calling of those in the teaching ministry than in examining pastoral candidates. And this strikes some as going far beyond giving the fundamental qualifications mentioned in the New Testament and actually inviting calling bodies to call workers much like secular employers will hire employees base on their resumes. The implied suspicion is that our reliance on the Holy Spirit is downplayed and almost rendered unnecessary since informed decisions can be made without supernatural guidance.

In approaching this question or concern, we may begin by stating that a reliance on the Spirit and the use of pertinent information available need not be exclusive of each other. The Evangelist Luke’s gathering and use of available information (Lk 1:1-4) did not diminish his trust in the Spirit. Nor did it interfere with the Spirit’s ability to make the finished product (St. Luke’s Gospel) any less a work of God for the benefit of his church. When we remember that procedural flexibility and freedom is a dominant characteristic of God’s calling of public ministers through the church, we will be slow to condemn a practice simply because it marks a departure over what used to be done. Advantages can be seen in gathering at least some information about eligible called workers, since calling bodies often do have particular needs and distinctive challenges the called worker is going to face.<sup>8</sup> If God himself, providentially, has indicated that a ministry at a certain place is currently a

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<sup>8</sup> A relatively high profile example here in Milwaukee comes to mind. Wisconsin Lutheran College, in seeking qualified professors who are also confessional brothers, may have a relatively narrow position description combined with a relatively small pool of

“round hole ministry,” what rationale invites the possibility of calling a “square peg minister” by ignoring things known about that minister?<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, we probably do equally well to watch the practice closely and offer loving, thoughtful warnings on how the procedures can be misused. If a calling body slips into the trap of thinking God must have in mind the same person it has in mind through its investigation, correctives may be the order of the day. It is conceivable that the Lord of the Church may want a public minister to carry out ministry in a manner wholly unforeseen—and perhaps even initially unappreciated—by the congregation, school, or organization in question. As in so many activities left to the discretion of the church, motive is all-important. Wisdom and prudence, blended with a prayerful humility as we approach the task of calling public servants, will never go out of style.

Closely related to the previous concern is a question that deals more with the behavior of the eligible public minister than with the calling body.

### **Is there anything wrong with seeking or interviewing for a call?**

Since God is the One who extends calls through his church, it follows logically that the Church should take the initiative in the calling process rather than the person called. “The call seeks the man” is a sentence we know and appreciate. There is no example or directive in Scripture offering encouragement to solicit an available office of ministry. So while there is direct biblical prohibition against a person lobbying for a call to service, to do so normally strikes us as self-serving, disorderly, and bordering on the presumptuous. Yet the phenomenon is neither new nor unheard of in our circles. Lists of abuses in calling procedures, published in our circles earlier in this century, usually included that of ministers “applying” for vacant positions, offering themselves for “less salary than the present incumbents,” and basically tending to “cheapen (not in dollars and cents) the doctrine of the divinity of the call.”<sup>10</sup>

I am personally not cognizant of this approach to filling ministerial vacancies making much of a comeback among us. I am aware that Concordia River Forest has largely gone from the traditional placement process to personal interviews between its teacher candidates and the calling bodies. Perhaps this shift in procedure reflects the difficulty an assignment committee in a much larger synod may have in sufficiently knowing student candidates and calling bodies. Perhaps the internal controversies within the LC-MS have led to a loss of trust in church leadership and/or the candidates coming out of synodical schools, so calling bodies want to be more directly involved in the selection process. I am unaware of a similar change in calling procedures having to do with the pastoral office, in the Missouri Synod or ours.

But would this be wrong? Can we legitimately make such a clear distinction between a person who “sets his heart on” (ὀρέγεται—stretches oneself out to grasp, reaches after) or “desires” (ἐπιθύμει—sets his heart upon, earnestly desires) the noble work of being an overseer in general (to enter the public ministry in general) and one who seeks to occupy a specific office or position of public ministry? A case can be made that this kind of behavior does not necessarily abolish the validity of the call, especially if this is the manner in which a given body of believers has chosen to go about maintaining a public ministry in its midst. We also admit that the Lord

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qualified workers to be located and identified. The Conference of Presidents has acknowledged the challenge here and knows its occasional limitations in procuring a call list the college can use. When these factors are understood, one hesitates to find immediate fault with a proactive gathering of information on potential workers and their availability for service.

<sup>9</sup> A related practice that takes the matter of “gathering information” much farther, is that of arranging face-to-face contacts to “test” or examine a potential called worker. Common in other church bodies, this practice is normally criticized severely in our circles. Yet this kind of behavior is not unheard of among us. Those interested in additional information on this may refer to the January, 1941 issue of the *Concordia Theological Monthly*, or to the October, 1938 issue of our own *Theologische Quartalschrift*. In the latter (p. 240), Professor August Zich bemoans an “abuse that has crept into our churches, due to ignorance of the fact that it is God who calls his ministers... the sad custom of sermon tasting by either the whole congregation or some committee, self-constituted or sent out by the congregation.” The words remind us we are not so far removed from practices that we tend to deplore.

<sup>10</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, January, 1941, p. 57. Similar examples are also provided by August Zich, *op. cit.*, pp. 241-242. One suspects that this kind of behavior was more prevalent during the Depression era.

is perfectly able to use those involved in what we deem “irregular” or inappropriate calling procedures for his good purposes. In fact, we trust he will. Calls that may be labeled “irregular” or “illegitimate”<sup>11</sup> are always subject to how God will permit, prevent, limit or use them.

All this is said not as an endorsement for the practice of soliciting particular calls, but to avoid going beyond Scripture. Since Scripture calls us to love and orderliness in all things, the practice can easily involve sin, when selfishness and loveless ambition trample established procedures and common courtesy. Perhaps that is the main point to be made here. The solicitation of a vacant position is wisely judged a practice that invites potential abuse and is probably best deemed both unnecessary and inadvisable among us.

The next point for examination focuses more on the public minister who has already received a call to serve and who is deliberating whether to accept or decline the call.

### **While holding a call are we content with information normally provided?**

It is customary in our church body that a calling body provides at least some information on the setting and situation in which the envisioned ministry is to be carried out. The amount and specific nature of this information may vary somewhat, and the freedom to seek additional information is granted to the worker considering the call.<sup>12</sup> There is some evidence that, at least on the part of some who are pondering calls, the appetite for this kind of information is increasing. For example, one of our pastors who was recently called to serve as pastor of a congregation requested to be put into contact with four or five members of the calling congregation who could give him information above and beyond that which had been initially supplied. Apparently seeking a cross-section of the parish membership, the pastor also specified that his respondents were not to be members of the church council. Presumably he felt he could gain a less biased or at least a clearer picture of the situation in the congregation by soliciting input in this manner.

One can react to this incident by assuming that the pastor in question knew his strengths and weaknesses quite accurately and that, with the finest of motives, he wanted to make sure that this parish was a “good match” for him so that a most harmonious working relationship would result. Is that necessarily wrong? It does signal a departure from what we largely assumed for the past few decades in our synod, namely, that less information was sufficient information, since the Lord knew the rest and, if he led someone to accept a call, he would accomplish his will for the called worker and calling body who began their relationship largely in ignorance of the other.

My initial reaction is that I can see at least four dangers involved. First, since it is a relatively new or at least somewhat rare practice among us, it can easily be seen as disorderly or as an indictment of the normal way our fellowship has chosen to do things. I’d prefer that chosen leaders address the issue first. Second, the practice leaves the door open to less noble motives in which the called minister seeks simply what pleases him, makes him comfortable, and furthers his career in his own chosen manner. Third, the members of the congregation who eventually supply the requested information can easily think the ultimate decision of the called minister somehow depends on them. Confusion and burdened consciences can result even when this was wholly unintended. It seems wiser and more orderly to let the congregational leaders and the district president serve as correspondents and trust them to give honest, accurate, and sufficient information.<sup>13</sup> Finally, I fear that

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<sup>11</sup> Even in circles, terminology like “legitimate” and “illegitimate” seems to vary. The Senior Pastoral Theology course at WLS provides these definitions: A *valid* call is one issued by a group that has the right to call, while an *individual* one issues from a group lacking such authorization from the church in question. A *legitimate* call is issued unanimously, while an *illegitimate* call is not unanimously extended by the group.

<sup>12</sup> A “Sample Letter to Accompany Pastor Call” is attached as *Appendix 1*. This will give an idea of the kind and amount of basic information that is commonly provided to the pastor being called.

<sup>13</sup> In at least a few of our districts we find the district presidents using a “pre-call” meeting together with a needs assessment questionnaire. A sample form is attached as *Appendix 2*. This meeting, together with this form, all the more ensures that the congregational leadership and the district president possess sufficient reliable information to share with the person deliberating on the call.

if the primary emphasis is on finding a good match between pastor and parish (or teacher and school), everyone involved may end up getting what they want but not what God wants. The Lord of the church may well desire to take the congregation and/or the called worker in new, unanticipated directions that neither initially desired. In the long run blessings could be forfeited. So while the practice might not be condemned out of hand, it need not be seen as praiseworthy.

At this point we turn our attention to questions that deal more with the duration and termination of calls rather than the issuing or establishing of them.

### **Do we still consider most calls permanent?**

An appropriate starting point for discussion is to acknowledge that a calling group of Christians has a high degree of flexibility in determining the duration of a given call. The call may be temporary or permanent. By “permanent” we refer to a call that is not arbitrarily limited in time. The duration of the public minister’s service is expressly left in the Lord’s hands. A “temporary” call does not simply mean one limited in time, but one whose time limit is set arbitrarily. At present the strong majority of calls issued in our fellowship are permanent ones. But it was not always so, and much has been written on this subject by Lutherans on American soil.

In the previous century it was a relatively common practice to call pastors to serve for a specified time—so the congregation could easily be rid of him if not fully pleased with his person or work. The practice in part stemmed from nightmare experiences of parishes that were forced to endure ill-equipped, inept or domineering pastors.<sup>14</sup> In time plenty of papers, sermons and articles attacked the conduct as abusive, unworthy and essentially illegitimate. In a 1938 article Professor August Zich lamented this practice and urged that such calls be neither extended nor accepted. He emphasized that “God calls the pastor into the flock, and God will see to it in His time and in His way that this relation of pastor and his flock is again dissolved.”<sup>15</sup>

It is possible that temporary calls are more frequently used among us than in previous decades. This may be especially true on the synodical level and having to do with administrative tasks. We need not see this as a cheapening of the call or as something contrary to good order. At the heart of the issue, of course, is the attitude or motivation that lies behind limiting the duration of a call. Believers remain perfectly free to issue temporary calls, and sometimes those calls are perfectly suitable (when known needs are limited in duration). But they are not to be arbitrary. Since the Lord is actively involved in the whole matter, a call is not to be equated with all employment contract nor a called worker considered a hireling. As always, Christian freedom is coupled with responsibility. For now, let us acknowledge with gratitude that within our circles the permanency of the call is consistently left in the Lord’s hands and pledge ourselves to continuing self-appraisal.

### **Have we expanded acceptable reasons for terminating a call?**

It is possible that this concern stems from the use of relatively new or unfamiliar terminology in reporting resignations or terminations of calls. The Conference of Presidents has offered explanations, but some degree of confusion or uncertainty apparently persists. These stated reasons are aside from the obvious ones of death, retirement, and the termination of one call necessitated by the acceptance of another. One of the more self-explanatory reasons that can be used is simply *Position Eliminated*. This reminds us of the preceding discussion regarding “temporary” calls, and is not really a new concept. Another commonly understood reason for terminating a call is *For Cause*. The traditional and appropriate reasons for this action include persistent adherence to false teaching, a scandalous life (loss of the irreproachable, blameless or respectable status),

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<sup>14</sup> In early America clergy boards frequently claimed and exercised the right of supervising or governing the placement or transfer of called workers. When congregations acted on their own they were often censured, accused of disregarding synodical advice, or going against rules of love and orderliness.

<sup>15</sup> “The Doctrine of the Divine Call with Reference To Present Day Abuses,” *Theologische Quartalschrift*, October, 1938, p. 240.

chronic unfaithfulness or willful neglect of duty, and established inability to carry out the duties of the office. A third category, invariably related to a resignation from the public ministry, is that of *Health Reasons*. Included in this would be an inability to serve due to mental or emotional disability in addition to physical illness. These terms and their definitions do not constitute new reasons for calls being terminated, nor should they cause misunderstanding. A fourth term now used to report an exit from the public ministry is *For the Good of the Ministry*. This termination of a call may involve or stem from a mistake in judgment, tactless or legalistic conduct, or an incident in a person's ministry that was serious enough to weaken or destroy the confidence and respect the calling body should have for the called minister. This loss of confidence at a particular place of service, however, is not considered by the proper authorities to be a permanent disqualification from the public ministry in general. In reality this is not a new concept at all, but one that is included in *The Shepherd Under Christ* when written 25 years ago.<sup>16</sup>

A final category of reasons for termination of a call is that of *Personal Reasons*, which would include family and financial as well as strictly personal factors—including a stated desire to change one's vocation or choice of career. This last reason for resigning a call, for personal reasons, has been cited as something of an "expansion" in reasons for terminating calls. Some have voiced the suspicion that we are increasingly allowing called workers to resign simply to escape or avoid unpleasant aspects of a particular call, and to do so with a minimum of rebuke or penalty, so that they are free to receive and accept a subsequent call soon afterward. Others lament that we seem to be losing the conviction that to resign from the public ministry without biblical reason is sinful.

In response to all this, we can say a number of things. There is no arguing the point that public ministers face temptation to resign from calls for reasons that appeal to the sinful nature. It is another thing to be certain that this is indeed the case when one sees a called worker resign. One person's inability to see the validity of a resignation does not make that resignation invalid in the eyes of the Lord. The temptation not to trust the circuit pastors, district presidents, and others called on to deal with the situations must be resisted. It is presumptuous as well as unloving to assume they are knowingly condoning improper conduct. Also, some may be laboring under what may have been a misunderstanding of traditional statements concerning resignations from the public ministry. Writers in our publications were known to invoke Luke 9:62 in this connection: "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." Some have understood this to mean that resigning from public ministry is tantamount to being unfit for the kingdom, that is, a forfeiture of Christian discipleship itself. While some resignations may involve an inadequate commitment to Christ, our hope is that the majority does not. Sometimes one's commitment to Christ may lead to a resignation from the public ministry.

The final concerns included in this brief study center more in what we *say* about public ministry rather than what we do procedurally. They are mentioned here since it is likely that the discussion of the issues will remain prominent in our midst.

### **Should we limit the term "ministry" to direct uses of the gospel?**

The challenge of identifying and consistently using adequate titles of ministry positions has troubled many church bodies. In some churches the terms "minister" and "ministry" are used on a regular basis in reference to almost any service role in the church. These service positions may have only a distant, or at best an indirect, connection with the actual use of the gospel, but in some way, may be said to be supportive of gospel ministry. The practice of using the terms in this manner bothers some of our people. They feel that the words

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<sup>16</sup> The concept is presented on pages 42-43 of that book as a valid reason for resignation and under the heading "Loss of the Congregation's Confidence." Worthy of mention is how that brief reference also clarifies the need to determine if the pastor was at fault or if members of the congregation were simply unwilling to endure sound teaching. Investigation by responsible authorities will determine what the cause of the difficulties might be.



minister and ministry should be reserved for people and functions that directly involve the use of the means of grace, or whose work in the church is directly or predominantly related to the task of proclaiming the gospel.

If we recall that “ministry” is “service” and is frequently used to translate , then we must acknowledge that the New Testament is quite comfortable using the same term for church service that directly involves the word of God (Ac 6:4) and service that does not have a direct involvement with the means of grace (Ac 6: 1).<sup>17</sup> In church history, however, the predominant (though not exclusive) use of the term came to be associated with primary gospel work, the proclamation of the word and administration of the sacraments. The result is that we today can freely acknowledge the legitimacy and freedom to use “ministry” terms and titles for a wide variety of ecclesiastical tasks, but should remain sensitive to the *usus loquendi* that developed over centuries and was used by our forefathers in the faith. The situation invites confusion. We are therefore invited to exhibit an awareness of the problem, a willingness to clarify what we mean and why we speak as we do, and patience with fellow saints whose preferred use of the terms differs from ours.

Finally, we mention another area of sensitivity with regard to ministers and ministry.

### **Are we blurring distinctions between public ministry and the work of all believers?**

In Ephesians 4:12 the work of God-given leaders, including “pastors and teachers,” is expressly said to include the equipping of God’s people (“saints”) for works of service/ministry (εις ἔργον διακονίας). Again, we observe that the New Testament is comfortable using the term “ministry” (διακονία) with reference to service carried out by the laity, God’s people in general, when it is not necessarily *public* ministry done at the request of and on behalf of fellow saints. When believers serve in their daily lives as members of the priesthood of all believers, that service can legitimately be called “ministry.”

If we choose to do this, however, we face the same kind of problem described in the preceding paragraphs. In the course of many years the term ministry came to be associated with public ministry almost to the exclusion of works of service carried out by the rank and file of Christendom in their daily lives. The challenge is thus before us to maintain proper distinctions and refrain from losing balance in emphasizing one potentially at the expense of the other. Both member ministry in their personal lives and public ministry on behalf of a calling body are clearly established by God and part of his will for the church. In one sense all Christians are ministers and in another sense they are not. While the point merits additional discussion, in this limited setting we perhaps do best to promise each other to remain aware of the issues involved, sensitive to the feelings of others, and strive for clarity of thought and speech when addressing the points raised.<sup>18</sup>

The more a person reads articles and essays written in the WELS (and, to a large degree, in other Lutheran church bodies in America) during the past 150 years the more one may appreciate how much we have matured in matters pertaining to the call and public ministry. When the fathers came to America they found no state laws to establish or maintain forms of ministry or procedures in ministry. Great diversity of opinion, doctrine, and practices prevailed in the new country among groups who bore the name Lutheran. Whatever weaknesses we now perceive, particularly in practical applications of doctrinal principles, often appear minor compared to what our forefathers did or endured.

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<sup>17</sup> Another Bible verse often discussed in the connection is 1 Timothy 5:17. “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.” An *Exegetical Brief* on this verse will appear in the upcoming (Winter 1999) issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. Some view this verse as saying some elders did not preach and teach, while others maintain that all elders preached and taught God’s Word but that some worked especially hard at the tasks. The brief article nicely states alternatives and provides the exegetical questions involved.

<sup>18</sup> It is unfortunate that many who have entered the fray on this issue have made it much more than a problem of unclear terminology. Some who stress the priesthood of believers as full ministers have given the impression that the public ministry is less than God-ordained and predominantly a matter of expediency. Some who seek to highlight the distinctive nature of the public ministry have occasionally denied the legitimacy of much that the priesthood can do, and have tried to claim that the public ministry is rooted in the apostolic office of the New Testament rather than in the office of gospel ministry entrusted to the church and extended to public ministers through the church.

Let us not fail to express thanks for the relative stability we currently enjoy. At the same time let us anticipate and prepare ourselves for continued discussion and debate on these subjects in and around our synod. This should not surprise us. We take very seriously what we are (church) and what we do (ministry) as God's people. Since we hold to the truth that God works among us and others through the means of grace, and since ministry is centered in serving people with those means, we will always be prepared to study, learn, present, discuss, defend, and clarify issues.

Let us above all else maintain sharp focus on the key issues that will never change. I am thinking especially of two: the Center of ministry, namely, Christ; and the heart of ministry, namely service. Christ and his saving work for mankind is the central message of ministry, the core content of all that is preached and taught by and for the benefit of God's people. The central goals of ministry and calls into public ministry can only occur when people focus on Christ who established ministry and calls people into it. Then there is the heart, the essence, of ministry: service. Of course. The best question we can ask is how we, in our Christian freedom, may best preach and teach the word of God and thus best serve God and people. There is no shortage of angels, archangels, cherubim or seraphim whose qualifications and personal characteristics seem to surpass ours in every way. But the call to serve has been extended to us. We are now talking pure grace, high honor, and grand privilege. With all that in mind and heart we rededicate ourselves to our calling as enunciated through Peter: "Live as free men...Live as servants of God."

## Appendix 1

### Sample Letter to Accompany Pastor Call (Put on church letterhead)

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Pastor \_\_\_\_\_,

Begin by expressing your congregation's confidence, joy, etc.:

Example: It is with great confidence and joy that we unanimously extend this call to you. We believe God has given you the spirit and abilities to fulfill it, should He lead you to accept it; and the thought of again having a full-time shepherd to serve here with us is indeed a happy one.

Include some congregation history:

Beginnings, building, expansion efforts/plans, length of service of previous and current called workers, etc.

Provide some current "history":

Membership numbers, average Sunday service attendance and school enrollment (especially if half or more of the calendar year is gone, as the synod publishes a statistical report on congregations based on 12/31 statistics); indebtedness figures, projects underway, recent significant voter resolutions/decisions

Mention things peculiar to or challenges facing the congregation:

Still using the "old" hymnal and/or King James Version of the Bible? Regularly having trouble paying bills? Former pastor living in the congregation? Changing neighborhood?

Give a description of your area.

Is population growing or declining? Is neighborhood changing? In what way(s)? Rapidly or slowly? Provide some evidence, such as nearby area of new home construction, factory expansion/closure, etc. (Example: Smithville is a 150 year-old community of about 50,000 people. It is still experiencing some growth, as are most of nearby communities, however it is fast becoming land-locked. Located in the far-west suburbs of the Chicago area, its population is predominantly white collar. Downtown Chicago is about a 40 minute drive. Nearby sister congregations are: \_\_\_\_\_.

List congregation groups, programs, materials:

Choir, Pioneers, Bible classes, teen group, OWLS, pre-school, stewardship, evangelism efforts, etc., how they are going, and what the pastor's role has been/would be in them. (Note: Some congregations have annual reports that detail this very nicely, and if you include such a report with the call material, your letter would only need to note where there may have been changes.)

Mention any plans/needs the congregation has:

Land, facilities, program, staff, etc; in the case of an associate pastor call, a job description, if you have one (Notes: 1) Be sure you are speaking for at least the church council, not just for yourself here! To assure that, you might want to have the church council review your letter before it is sent. 2) If your congregation's leadership filled out the "Parish Status/Needs Assessment" forms with the district president, a copy of it will be sent to the man you call. The district president will send the copy. He will do so, however, without comment, other than to briefly describe how the information and ratings on it were gathered and made.)

Give information on congregation structure:

Council, boards, committees, etc. (Note: This might also be done by simply including a copy of the constitution and bylaws with the call material.)

Describe the facilities and equipment:

Church, school, parsonage (Consider having your wife or another woman of the congregation write up this part!), their distance from one another, where the study/office is, whether there is a church-owned computer

Describe the “help” (if any):

Is there secretarial help? Is it paid or volunteer, full or part-time? Is there a computer for the pastor’s use? Are there expectations the congregation may have of the new pastor’s wife, based on roles that were filled by the previous pastor’s wife?

Elaborate on compensation/benefits

Example: We will, of course, pay moving costs. We are committed to compensating our called workers with a salary somewhat above synod code; payment of synod pension and hospitalization insurance; one-half of the federal self-employment tax; compensation for certain medical benefits not covered by the synod plan because of the deductible; three weeks of paid summer vacation and reimbursement for all out-of-pocket congregation expenses.

Reimbursement for travel expenses connected with moving:

Will the congregation do it? For mileage (synod rate is \$.28) or for actual gas and toll expenses? On how many vehicles? For lodging? For meals?

List people and best times to contact:

Example: We hope this has answered many questions for you. If you have others, don’t hesitate to call (collect?) You can reach me at: \_\_\_\_\_(home) or \_\_\_\_\_(office). The best times are \_\_\_\_\_. Our vacancy pastor is: \_\_\_\_\_. His phone numbers are \_\_\_\_\_(home) or \_\_\_\_\_(office).

A concluding paragraph:

Example: Our will in this matter is obvious. We will now join you in praying that God will soon lead you to see His will in it.

Yours and His,

\_\_\_\_\_ Evangelical Lutheran Church  
(Sign your name), President

Other possible materials to send with the call:

Constitution and bylaws	Recent newsletter(s) & Sunday bulletins
Membership directory	School handbook(if applicable)
Annual report	Budget for current year
Recent anniversary booklet or bulletin (for congregation history)	
Local area brochures (including a map, if possible, with church location)	

## Appendix 2

### PARISH STATUS/PASTORAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT

of

*St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church*

Wells, Wisconsin

Spring, 1998

#### I. Parish Purpose/Mission

Complete this sentence: "We exist as a congregation in order to 1) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_; 2) \_\_\_\_\_; and  
 3) \_\_\_\_\_."

#### II. Parish Status

##### A. Strengths, weaknesses and character

1. List what you feel are real strengths of your congregation.
  - a)
  - b)
  - c)
  - d)
  
2. List areas in which you feel your congregation is weak or where it needs to make better use of its resources and/or opportunities for doing kingdom work.
  - a)
  - b)
  - c)
  
3. Complete this sentence: "A word or phrase that would best describe the current mood/spirit/personality of our congregation is \_\_\_\_\_."
  
4. On a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high or very good), how would you rate your congregation in the following areas?
 

___ Unity/cohesiveness	___ Long range planning
___ Financial stewardship	___ Being open/willing to change
___ Communication	___ Support of its school
___ Congregation structure	___ Spirit in the school (staff)
___ Awareness of the mission of the church	
___ Potential for new members from the area	
___ Carrying through on programs, projects, etc. that have been adopted	
___ Member involvement in congregation work, special projects, programs, etc.	
___ Member commitment to and involvement in outreach (canvassing, witness visits, calling on Sunday visitors, etc.)	
___ Carrying out church discipline (correcting, regaining, reactivating, and possibly excommunicating straying members)	

B. Priorities

1. Complete this sentence “If I could add or change just one thing to improve my congregation’s ministry, spirit and life, it would be \_\_\_\_\_.”  
\_\_\_\_\_.
2. Complete this sentence: “In addition to preaching and teaching, the two things for which our congregation most needs a pastor are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.”  
\_\_\_\_\_.

III. Pastoral Needs

A. Gifts and abilities

1. List what you feel are very desirable abilities or gifts for the next pastor of your congregation to have.
  - a)
  - b)
  - c)
2. Now number them in what you feel is priority order.

B. Other considerations

1. If the age of your next pastor is an important factor, into what range should his age fall? N.B.: As a rule, a man with five years of pastoral ministry experience is about 30 years old, a man with 15 years of experience is 40 years old, etc.  
( ) Not important      Range: \_\_-\_\_ years old
2. Complete this sentence: “The two things to which I think a pastor of this congregation should give top priority each week are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.”  
\_\_\_\_\_.
3. On a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), indicate how important you feel each of the following will be in your next pastor.
 

___ Experience in evangelism	___ Counseling skills and experience
___ Goal-minded	___ Experience With Christian day school
___ Sensitive to tradition in worship forms, congregation policies, etc.	
___ Innovative and open to change in such things	
___ Personal appearance (attire, hair, etc.)	
___ Other (Please specify!): _____	
_____	

IV. Jot down any other information or comments you think the district president and vice presidents would find helpful in preparing a call list for your congregation.