



A Biblical Perspective on Recruitment to the Public Gospel Ministry

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Recruitment -- the meaning and connotation of that word can change dramatically, depending on a person's point of view. With our synod's typical terseness, it is the only word that appears on my office door, in bold capital letters. Because my school, *Michigan Lutheran Seminary*, is the most centrally located of the sixteen schools in our Tri-Valley athletic conference, once each month the athletic directors of all the conference schools meet at MLS. Our conference room is located directly next door to my office, so as those fifteen public high school A.D.s arrive for their meeting and turn down the hallway toward the conference room, the first thing they see is that word barking out at them -- RECRUITMENT!

A few years back, when MLS was just a fledgling member of the TVC and these meetings began, the reactions of the A.D.s to that word were peevish, to say the least. Why should Seminary, the sole private school in the league, be permitted to maintain an entire office for the very purpose of doing what all their public high schools were expressly forbidden to do. No doubt at least some among them were convinced that this was the obvious explanation for Seminary's perennial athletic success.

Time corrected that impression. Our administrator and athletic director repeatedly tried to explain to them what *recruitment* means for us, but what really reassured those A.D.s was what they witnessed with their own eyes -- like the fact that the average offensive lineman for MLS weighs less than 170 pounds, or that the average varsity basketball player for Seminary is under six feet tall. It didn't take long for the A.D.s to figure out that they had little to fear from MLS's recruitment program because whoever was in charge if it clearly wasn't very good at his job.

The fact that we appreciate the irony in that statement indicates that we already possess, to one degree or another, what this paper claims to offer -- a Biblical perspective on recruitment. Even as we chuckle at the myopia of those A.D.s, however, it is possible that our view of recruitment may be fuzzied by some of the same misconceptions that confused them; namely, that recruitment is an activity carried on only by schools; or that recruitment efforts are aimed at those who will help to enhance the school's programs, whether athletic, musical, or academic; or that the goal of recruitment is to increase a school's enrollment or improve its position statistically or demographically; and so on.

So my assignment from the conference program committee, if I understand it correctly, is not to create our Biblical perspective on recruitment but to clarify it, focus it, perhaps even expand it. The timing of this assignment is fortunate since it coincides with another task given to me by our ministerial education system, to introduce to this conference newly-developed materials that are intended to assist congregations with the work of recruitment on the local level.

My presentation to you today, then, will be in two parts. The first will be a look at the work of recruitment to the public ministry from a biblical point of view. The second will include the introduction of the recruitment handbook, *Who Will Go: Our Congregation Recruits to the Gospel Ministry*, and its companion

video tapes, *The Public Ministry: A Blessing to Our Church* and *The WELS Ministerial Schools: An Investment in Our Church's Future*.

As we begin, I want to call back the Tri-Valley athletic directors one more time to let them illustrate the limitations of human perspective in the work of recruitment. As fruits of the efforts of the MLS recruitment office, they feared they would see hulking offensive linemen or Jordanesque point guards donning the Seminary red and white; they were relieved when they did not see such athletes appear. Not unlike them, we may all be quick to make recruitment judgments based on what our eyes can see and so to focus on the biggest, the smartest, or what looks like the best. We recall that the prophet Samuel had a similar problem when God sent him to recruit a new leader for Israel from the house of Jesse (1 Sa 16). Samuel wanted the tall one, the eldest. God wanted the little one, the youngest. God saw something in young David that Samuel couldn't see because, as God explained it, *The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.* (v7)

Those words offer a valuable reminder to anyone who cares about recruitment to the public ministry, a pointed reminder about where that work must begin -- in the heart. There is, of course, only One who can do that work, and without it no other recruiting can be done. Hence, our Biblical perspective on recruitment to the public Gospel ministry points us first to this truth:

I. Ultimately, God is the recruiter

Ron¹ was a prime prospect for the pastoral ministry. He was bright, energetic, good looking and personable. He had a supportive family. He had older siblings who had already broken the trail to MLC. Distance wasn't a problem. Money wasn't a problem. Something else was -- Ron didn't want to be a pastor. He didn't want to be a teacher. He didn't want to be in the ministry. At all. Professors urged, parents encouraged, peers wheedled and needled, recruitment officers wrote and called and visited, all to no avail. Ron was going to college here or there or anywhere but New Ulm. And he did... for a semester. Then he left and headed west, to Martin Luther College. Today he is finishing his first year of pastoral studies and is completely content.

Ron is a perfect example of the sort of prospect that turns recruitment officers' hair gray. The sort who makes us wonder whether the efforts of our schools' five recruitment officers and a system-wide annual recruitment budget in excess of a quarter of a million dollars is really all worth it. Won't God get the ones he wants anyway?

Not necessarily. At least, Scripture does not make us that promise. There is no such thing as a doctrine of election to the public ministry. It is true, however, that in some cases (and Ron's is a case in point) God does manage to get ones that everybody else has missed. Actually, in all cases, if anyone is "got" for the public

¹ The anecdotes that illustrate this paper are true. The names have been changed.

ministry, it ultimately is God who has done the "getting."

Christian ministry proceeds out of Christian faith, and that faith is born of the Holy Spirit working through the Word and sacraments. Paul wrote to the Thessalonian believers, *We ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.* (2 Thes 2:13-14) Christian faith isn't the result of being *sold* a bill of goods. It is the result of being *given* a wondrous measure of grace, for *it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not from yourselves; it is a gift of God...* (Eph 2:8-9).

That gift, delivered by the Holy Spirit, calls the sinner to faith and sanctifies him in faith. It transforms the unbeliever, *recreating* him as a faithful follower of Christ Jesus who is eager to do good works (2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:10). The sinner is no longer a child of this world, compelled by his love of stuff or his love of self. He has become a child of God, compelled by the love of Christ *because (he is) convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.* (2 Cor 5:14-15)

For believers, who abide in Christ and who have Christ abiding in them, it is impossible for their faith *not* to bear fruit. (Jn 15:5) Chief among those fruits of faith that Christ desires from the branches grafted to his vine is that they bear witness to his Good News of salvation. This they may do in a very general way through their support for the preaching of the Gospel in all the world (Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15), and in a very particular way through their own sharing of the Word of truth with their family, friends, and neighbors (1 Pe 2:5+9,3:15). In either case, believers are exercising that duty and privilege conferred upon them all by the resurrected Savior when he said to his disciples and, through them, to all Christians, *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.* (Jn 20:21)

These words define what we call the Ministry of the Keys, and they establish what is the one ministry Christ has given to his church on earth -- the ministry of the Gospel. It is a ministry in which every believer has a part, and since it is God who has called every believer to faith, it is altogether fitting to say that God has recruited every believer to his ministry. Our gracious God, the ultimate Recruiter, has made every Christian a member of his royal priesthood (1 Pe 2:9), a priesthood that, like the Church of Christ itself, is universal.

The Lord Jesus dearly desires that each individual believer strive faithfully to carry on this ministry of faith in his or her own daily life. However, in the faith life that Christians share collectively in the visible church it would be disorderly to the point of chaos for each individual priest of God to try to function. In 1 Corinthians 14, St. Paul warns against the sort of confusion that can occur if the church lacks clear leadership. He concludes with the familiar admonition *God is not a God of disorder, but of peace.* (v33).

To promote peace and insure order, God has established that his people should entrust the public

exercise of the ministry of the keys to individuals they train and call for that purpose. In accepting such a call from God's people, these individuals enter the *public ministry* of the Gospel. Contrary to what some may suggest, this public Gospel ministry is not merely an invention of man or a human response to a perceived need in the church. The Lord Jesus himself ordained such work. From the earliest New Testament days, it has been Christ Jesus who provided those who served in the public ministry of his Word (Ac 6:1-6; 13:1-3), giving *some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers* (Ep 4:11). Ever since that time God's people have recognized that those who serve in the public ministry are called not only by the assembled believers but by the Lord Jesus himself, and are the gracious gifts of Christ to his church. (Eph 4:11; Act 20:28)

In his wisdom, however, Christ has not chosen to drop those gifts down on his church from heaven like angels, or miraculously raise them up from dry bones like the mighty army of Ezekiel's prophecy (although the process Christ does use is much closer to the latter than the former). Rather, the Lord charges his people with finding and calling into the public ministry those who are gifted and qualified for such work. *Choose men full of the Spirit and wisdom*, the Word tells us (Ac 6:3). *Entrust these things to reliable men who are able to teach others.* (2 Ti 2:2).

By his own example, Jesus also shows us that before such individuals can be called into service, they first need to be trained and instructed in those truths that are necessary for their work (Mt 10:1f). Christ did not expect his disciples to go into all the world and invent their own doctrines. Rather, he expected they would draw on the instruction he had given them, that they would hold to his teachings (Jn 8:31) and teach others to obey everything he had commanded them (Mt 28:20).

Our Savior's command and example supply the basic model according to which the Christian church historically has prepared persons for service in the public ministry. We observe, for example, how Paul carefully instructed Timothy and then urged him to see that instruction as *the pattern of sound teaching* (2 Ti 1:13) that Timothy might use to instruct others (2 Ti 2:2). In his age, Dr. Luther recognized how essential it is to the welfare of the church to train public ministers for the future. In a sermon on the ministry of the keys Luther wrote:

If misfortune is to be prevented, it can be done only by teaching and training our precious youth in the right and Christian manner. Then, when presently we lay down our head and sleep, they will step into our place and will not only set forth right doctrine to the people and impress it with all diligence but will also uphold it against the sectaries and false teachers. ...There must be people who defend the doctrine and oppose heretics, so that doctrine is not adulterated by them. For this purpose schools must be maintained; from them come the people who can contend for the truth. If, then, a man helps this cause and gives, so that we can have such persons as are able to teach aright, comfort the downcast, and resist the wolves... he should not consider this merely a paying of bills but should look upon it as a praise and thank offering to God, and he should pray with all earnestness that, from it, God would send laborers into his harvest. (*Plass, II, 2975*)

We all would like to claim that in this present age the resolve of our Wisconsin Synod to train faithful public servants of the Word is as strong as Luther's ever was. Some events of recent years might bring such a

claim into question, but it is unquestionably true that our synod is still committed to a strategy for training public ministers that is based on the model of the Master Recruiter. Though the WELS system of ministerial education is structured upon a broad base in the liberal arts, at its heart it still involves a thorough *indoctrination* into those things our Lord has taught us, that we might teach them to others.

Demands upon the work of the public ministry, or what we imagine those demands to be, may call for periodic revisions in our curricula for training workers. Our changing world may suggest new forms for the work into which we call them. At its essence, however, the public Gospel ministry is unchanged and unchanging. It is still and always the public working of the binding and loosing keys. It is still and always the public proclaiming of the Gospel.

That means that the public ministry is still and always work that only children of God can do. And choosing to consider such work, or offering one's self to prepare for such work, is a decision that only a child of God can make. Such a decision is a good work, a fruit of Gospel-motivated faith. Whether such a decision occurs in connection with the efforts of a human recruiter or, as in the case of young Ron, in spite of those efforts does not matter. It is God who gave the Gospel. It is God who gives the faith. It is God who moves faith's response. Ultimately, and in every case, God is the recruiter.

II. God today recruits through his believers

Maria lived for nearly twelve years without knowing she had a Savior. Like many of her neighbors in the Latin American country of her birth, she was nominally Catholic, but that fact had little meaning for her daily life. Then one day a classmate showed Maria a Bible study folder from a local WELS mission. The next Sunday Maria went along to get a folder for herself. She met her Savior. She heard his voice. It reached into her heart and called her, first to faith and then to service. What she had learned, she wanted to teach. Her family had no money for Maria to attend a WELS prep school. A WELS congregation in Michigan had a healthy student assistance fund, but no students of their own to assist. Happily for both, Maria and the congregation found each other. Today, having graduated from MLS and MLC, Maria has returned to teach in that mission that first introduced her to her Lord.

Who recruited Maria? Did the classmate who showed her the Bible study folder? Or was it the mission teacher who was the first to give Maria the truth? How about the mission pastor who recognized Maria's potential for service and beat the bushes for assistance? Or the prep school president who went out on a limb to enroll her? Or the recruitment office that arranged financial help with the local congregation? Or the congregation members who approved a rather unconventional use of their funds?

Who recruited Maria? God did. No question. But, along the way, he was gracious enough to involve a wide variety of other believers in the process.

Holy Scripture offers us numerous accounts of how God directly recruited workers for his service and called them into his ministry, all in one dramatic episode. We think of how God answered every objection of a recalcitrant Moses, who wanted to say no to God but couldn't (Ex 3). We recall how God kept after Samuel till

at last the boy recognized the voice of the One who was calling him (1 Sa 3). God's patience in providing sign after sign for Gideon comes to mind (Jdg 6), as do God's remarkable methods of persuasion in the case of Jonah (Jo 1-2). The New Testament accounts are no less impressive. Luke records how it apparently took a miraculous catch of fish to convince Simon Peter to give up his nets and start casting for souls (Lk 5). And, when it comes to impressive recruitment efforts, the calling of Saul on the Damascus road has yet to be topped. (Ac 9)

When the WELS recruitment officers meet, it's not uncommon for someone to mention how much simpler things could be if God would just go back to his old ways. Our cheesy videos and our campus visits just don't stand up too well when compared to a talking burning bush or three days in the belly of a whale. But the truth of it is that, since the calling of Paul, the last of the apostles, God has chosen to do his recruiting indirectly. He works through his revealed Word and through the efforts of his people.

Of course, even before Paul's time, Scripture makes clear that God often used human agents to accomplish his recruitment objectives. We recall how faithful Hannah sent her young son off to prep school (1 Sa 1) but, while doing so, continued her maternal love and support for Samuel as we see in her annual gift to him of a new coat (1 Sam 2:19). We note how, at God's behest, Elijah went out and recruited his own successor, casting his mantle around Elisha's shoulders (1 Kg 19, 2 Kg 2). Among the Lord's disciples, Andrew's invitation to Simon Peter and Philip's persuasive words to a skeptical Nathanael, "*Come and see*" fit this pattern (Jn 1), and we can not overlook the credit that Paul gives to Timothy's mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, for preparing that young boy in their home for future service.

We might make a pair of observations based on these examples from Scripture. First, recruitment is typically the act of believers urging believers to serve their Savior. Hannah's commitment of her son to God's service was preceded by her confidence that her son was a gift from God, a divine answer to her humble prayer. Samuel complied with her wishes, not simply because he trusted his mother, but because he trusted his mother's God. So we are told of him that Samuel grew not only in stature but also *in favor with the Lord* (1 Sa 2:26). In throwing his cloak around Elisha's shoulders, Elijah did so trusting that there was spiritual substance behind that symbolic act, substance that Elisha also acknowledged when, in assuming Elijah's ministry he asked for *a double portion of Elijah's spirit* (2 Kg 2:9). The efforts of Andrew, Philip, Lois, and Eunice to direct others to the Savior's service were as much confessions of their own faith as they were invitations to the Lord's work. And the responses of Peter, Nathanael, and Timothy, while not characterized by perfect faith, can at least be recognized as Spirit-led triumphs over doubt and the inclinations of their sinful natures. While we can not deny the possibility that God could use unbelievers to recruit, or even that he might identify an unbeliever as a prospect for recruitment (Ac 9 - Saul), ideally recruitment to the public Gospel ministry is an invitation from faith to faith. At the very least, this illustrates that no one has a stronger stake in encouraging future servants of the Word than do those who wish to be served with that Word.

Second, Scripture's models suggest that though recruitment does not require a previous personal relationship with a prospect, the effort is often most natural when such a relationship exists. Speaking to one's child, as did Hannah, or to another relative, as did Andrew, or to a friend and fellow believer, as did Philip, provides an immediate context of trust and understanding that can help to allay a prospect's hesitation. This fact emphasizes the special responsibility we have to be watchful for opportunities to recruit among those who are closest to us, in our own congregations, our own classrooms, our own homes.

At times we may feel hesitant to approach those nearest us in this way, lest we seem to be exploiting our personal connection to them. This fear is often expressed by parents who are loathe to "push" their children in a direction they may not wish to go. Martin Luther had little patience with this sort of vacillation when it came to providing prospects for the public ministry. In the preface to a book on family management by Justus Menius, Luther wrote to fathers:

My dear fellow, if you have a child fit for instruction, you are not free to bring him up as you please, nor is the way you deal with him simply a matter of your choice... God needs a pastor, a preacher, a teacher in his spiritual kingdom; you can supply him with one, but you fail to do so. Note that thereby you are not robbing a coat from a poor man but many thousands of souls from the kingdom of God and, so far as you are concerned, are sending them to hell, for you are depriving the Kingdom of the person who would be fit to help these souls. On the other hand, if you bring up your child in such a way that he is able to become a keeper of souls, you do not simply give a coat or endow a monastery or build a church. You are indeed doing something far greater; you are giving a savior and a servant of God who is able to help many thousands of souls get to heaven. (*Plass, II, 2977*)

In a more general way, Luther declared in a sermon on Mark 8: "Woe to all who help to bring about a lack of ministers and have not kept the house of God from becoming desolate. Still greater woe to those who frighten others and keep them from entering the ministry or from staying in it; they are worse than Jews and Turks!" (*Plass, II, 2974*)

The doctor's strong words remind us of another fact that Scripture's examples confirm: when God chooses to use human agents to carry out his recruitment work, he must use sinners. This means that their recruitment efforts (and ours) may often be clumsy and imperfect, employing awkward methods that proceed from mixed motives, and being plagued by doubts and hesitations that result in missed opportunities. Even the most heart-felt recruitment appeals will proceed from hearts across which the shadow of sin still falls. Since this is so, the temptation will not always be avoided to recruit in ways that confuse law and gospel, that place worldly inducements ahead of spiritual concerns, that follow sociological trends rather than scriptural models, or that exalt the prospect for the ministry above the ministry itself and the potential servant above the One to be served.

The risk that the devil can win such victories even in the well-intended work of recruitment should not make us hesitant to recruit. It should simply emphasize again the importance of remembering that God is the recruiter. Recruitment only really works where God works, and that is through his Word.

Mercifully, God has chosen to place that Word into the hands of his believers. Scripture says God has

entrusted his Word to us (Ro 3:2; 1 Co 4:1). That means God trusts us to put that Word to use as he intends, not only to call hearts to Christian faith but also to encourage lives to Christian service. Doing so is a joy by which God blesses us and allows us to be blessings to others.

In a delightful little book entitled *We Have This Ministry*, Robert Rodenmayer suggests that many in the public ministry today are where they are because they were at one time the beneficiaries of such godly encouragement. He writes:

Behind every man of God there is a person or persons through whom God's leaven has worked. It may be the boy's own father; one of the lasting tributes to the ministry is the number of clergymen's sons who follow in their fathers' footsteps. It may be some other member of the family. It may be a lay person in the local church or it may be an encounter with some other person who saw the young man not only as he was but as he might be, and who took the time. (*Rodenmayer, p.17*)

Scripture's models of recruitment urge us to do the same... to take the time with those prospects we may know, time to let God's leaven work through his Word and through us.

III. God recruits prospects, not products

Jack was a punk. He walked into the MLS gym on registration day with a chip on his shoulder and a smirk on his face that made everybody want to knock off one and slap off the other. A check of his family background made it clear that Jack's bad attitude was probably genetic. Predictably, Jack was in and out of trouble all through his freshman year, but somehow he managed to scrape by both academically and socially. Then came tenth grade, the strangest year in any adolescent's life. Jack came back in full form... and lasted less than a month. Major bust. Big trouble. Out on his ear. The following June, Jack reapplies. He wants to come back. Do we let him? Conversations with parents, letters from the pastor. "Jack has changed," we hear. We've heard that before. But Jack comes back and... his hair is cut. The chip and smirk are nowhere in sight. He has a girlfriend, a sweet, friendly, Lutheran girl friend, not a gangsta girl. He makes honor roll. Consistently. And he gets involved. A sports team. A part in the play. On to senior year, now a solid citizen. College choice time comes -- it's MLC, pastor track. Really? Yup. Jack's an MLC pastoral freshman now, in the five-year plan and doing fine. And, by the way, he recruited his girlfriend to go along and become a teacher.

What happened to change Jack? It may be impossible to answer that question with certainty, but it may be possible that the answer is something as simple as *time*. Time happened. Time for Jack to grow up, not just physically and emotionally but, most especially, spiritually. Time for the law and the gospel to do their work; time for the Spirit to begin again his oft-repeated miracle of making ministerial silk purses out of sin-spattered sow's ears.

Because the targets of our human recruitment salvos are so often young people, it's not unusual for those efforts to be met with responses that are typical of youthful immaturity -- indecision, negativism, sarcasm, sometimes just plain silliness. We all passed through that phase; most of us grew out of it. Today's young people do, too, often more quickly than we did. But they need time to grow, time for faith to grow in them. Hence, our recruitment efforts must be marked by patience, and need to avoid snap judgments about the suitability of some prospects.

Suppose God had given up on Joseph just because, as a boy, Joseph was a spoiled brat. Suppose he had turned away from Samson just because Samson started behaving like an egotistical lout. Suppose Jesus got irked and decided Peter had shot off his mouth once too often. Suppose the Savior had measured *our* suitability for the ministry based on the way *we* acted back in high school. Or even in college.

To the Corinthians Paul wrote, *When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.* (1 Co 13:11) Paul's words hold out the hope that the maturing process actually works. However, even in Paul's case, it did not work easily. To Timothy, Paul confessed, *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners -- of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.* (1 Ti 1:16)

When we seek and evaluate prospects for the public ministry and choose targets for our recruitment efforts, let us keep this example of Christ's mercy and patience in the case of Paul foremost in our minds. God does not seek, through us, to recruit finished products who are already fit for service. In fact, those we imagine to be fit (or who imagine themselves to be) may have the hardest time being fitted for the ministry.

A senior pastor in this conference who served as the bishop for a long succession of vicars often claimed that he told the assignment committee, "Send me somebody who has sinned." (They sent him me.) His point is plain enough. The most obviously "qualified" prospects for the ministry may also be at risk of being the most self-satisfied or self-righteous. Such stumbling blocks can make the path to humble service difficult to tread. However, those who, like Paul, are well aware that they are worthless sinners won't need to be convinced that the chance to serve the Savior is a gracious gift and a precious privilege. And an experiential knowledge of sin and forgiveness can provide a valuable background for someone who some day will seek rightly to distinguish and apply law and gospel.

In recruiting us into his spiritual priesthood, our God has shown unlimited patience (2 Pe 2:9). In recruiting for God to his public ministry, we need to mimic God's model.

IV. God recruits to the highest office

Brent, Allie, Kristen, Josh, and Peter came from backgrounds that were broadly mixed -- one from a pastor's home, another from a teacher's family, the other three from lay households with families at varying levels of church involvement. Their interests, talents, and experiences were equally diverse. The common factor all shared, along with their enrollment at MLS, was that at one time or another each of them individually spoke these exact words: "I am not holy enough for the ministry."

They were right, of course. They were not holy enough. None of us are. The Lord of the Church is not upset by that fact, however; he works with it. God felt no need to remove the thorn in the flesh, that messenger of Satan that plagued the apostle Paul. God knew that flaw, whatever it may have been, served to keep Paul

conscious of his utter dependence on God's gracious Gospel power. That power, God explained, was *made perfect in Paul's weakness* (2 Co 12:9). God's wisdom in dealing so with Paul made Paul wiser in his dealings with others, so that Paul could explain to those same Corinthians, *We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us* (4:7)

The fact that God is graciously willing to carry on his ministry using jars of clay should not, however, imply that God's ministry is open to any interested crack-pot. God himself terms the public ministry *a noble task*, and then proceeds to set noble standards for all who aspire to serve in that office. (1 Ti 3) Our essay this afternoon will study those standards in detail. Here let us be satisfied to sum up with Paul's brief but weighty words in his second letter to Corinth: *We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.* (2 Co 6:3)

The public Gospel ministry deals with eternal truths. It wields an incontestible sword. It is entrusted with the welfare of blood-bought souls. It is permitted to speak and act in the name of the people of God. That ministry is, without qualification, the highest office to which a child of God may aspire or in which he may be allowed to serve.

This exalted view of the public ministry needs to be displayed vividly in our recruitment efforts, so that it can dispel any thought that the ministry is but one more in an assortment of possible futures from which a prospect might choose. The high calling of public service to the Savior must be held up before God's people as a profession *worthy of double honor* (1 Ti 5:17), both for the sake of the Word it proclaims and the God whose Word it is. And this view of the public ministry must be presented, not merely in words, but in actions and attitudes as well.

As servants of God, we must be sure that nothing in our speech or behavior contradicts the honored view of the ministry we wish to present to those we serve, and especially to those we would encourage to follow us into such service. In keeping with Paul's admonition to Timothy, we must watch our life as closely as we watch our doctrine (1 Ti 4:16), realizing that to stumble in the first can be as damaging to the church as to tumble in the second.

As a church of God, our synod must ensure that nothing in its policy or practice serves to demean the office of the public ministry or diminish those who serve in that office. On the contrary, every reasonable effort ought to be expended to demonstrate, by word *and* by action, that as a synod we honor and, indeed, we treasure those whom God calls to serve as his public ministers.

When the public ministry is so honored, those whom we recruit will realize that they are being invited not merely into an interesting profession but into a high and holy office. They may rightly imagine, then, that they are not holy enough for the ministry. How wonderful to be able to reassure such prospects with the words of Paul that so often serve to reassure us: *Such confidence is ours through Christ before God: not that we are*

competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant... (2 Co 3:4-6)

V. God recruits to lowly esteem

Becky was the sort of student that, at MLS, we can easily overlook, simply because she seemed to have all the right stuff already in place. Bright. Energetic. Involved. And committed to becoming a Lutheran day school teacher. Becky didn't need to be recruited. Then, early in her junior year, her attitude changed. Her usually smiling face turned glum. Her solid academic performance grew shaky. Attempts at casual "hallway counseling" were met with monosyllables. Finally, I called her to my office. Following five minutes of stone-walling, she let the dam break. In a flood of tears, Becky explained that her father had dropped a bomb. She couldn't go to DMLC, he said, because she'd never be able to support herself as a Lutheran teacher. Her dreams were crumbling. The loss of family harmony was too high a price to pay for what she'd hoped to do. Dad got his way. Becky skipped DMLC. She eventually married a lawyer; she can support herself well. But, last I heard, she was no longer in the church.

I don't know many sad recruitment stories; God mercifully allows me to forget most of them. This one sticks with me. In part, that's because of the way it illustrates the tremendous influence that parents can have on their children, for good or not.

In part, however, Becky's story also sticks in my mind as a reminder that the public ministry isn't for everyone. It certainly isn't for those for whom this world's vaunted pleasures hold any great appeal. We recall Luke's account of how Jesus responded to three prospects, all of whom seemed willing to be recruited to his service:

As they were walking along the road, a man said to (Jesus), "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family." Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." (Lk 9:57-62)

To each man the Lord's words are startlingly direct, and the messages they bear aren't exactly the sort of thing of which recruitment brochures are made: 'In the public ministry, don't expect all the comforts of home. Jesus never had them, and he has never promised them. In the public ministry, expect to make sacrifices. What counts isn't what is best for you, your family, or others you love. What counts is what's best for the Lord you serve. In the public ministry, there is no place for divided loyalties. Those who sow the seed of the Word need to keep their eyes on the furrow.'

Of course, Luke's account here is descriptive, not prescriptive. Scripture isn't suggesting that we try to recruit by making the public ministry sound as difficult and unappealing as possible. It is fair to judge, however, that we have here a Biblical indication that our recruitment efforts ought to include a fair measure of candor.

The Lord Jesus himself adopted that approach, mincing no words when he sent out his disciples with the

forewarning, "*All men will hate you because of me.*" (Mt 10:22) It would be difficult to be more straightforward than that.

Dr. Luther also favored the direct approach. He pulled no punches when he depicted the work of the public ministry. In his commentary on Genesis, expounding upon the "*sweat of your brow*" (Ge 3:19) that is part of the consequence of man's fall into sin, Luther wrote:

Let us justly and properly distinguish this sweat. The household sweat is great; the political sweat is greater; the church sweat is the greatest! Look at Paul and you will readily understand how profusely his office made him sweat. For since the church in all ages is infested with devils, harassed by heresies, scandals, and sins, by the unjust violence of tyrants, and by evils of every sort, how can we say that there are no labors and sweats in her? (*Plass, II, 2984*)

It would be inaccurate and unfair to suggest that today's prospects for the public ministry are unwilling to sweat for what they believe in. They are... but they also live in a world that tells them sweat is an investment that owes them an ample return, and a world that raises expectations of that return to disproportionate heights. Materialism is an inclination that has always been natural to man's sinful heart, but it is hard to deny that the urge is especially strong in our present evil world. Single-minded devotion to the having and the getting is not merely tolerated today, it is touted as the ideal. A man's intrinsic value is regularly measured by his extrinsic worth. Even Christians who are not of such a world still must find a level at which they can live in it. As the strains upon the Christian increase, so do those upon the Christian minister and upon the ones who might be recruited for such ministry.

That strain is not eased when the potential recruit looks for guidance to those he knows who serve in the public ministry and receives (or perceives) some very mixed signals. What of the teacher who guides his young charges to see that Christian service calls for willing sacrifice, but then also lets them hear him gripe about the size of his paycheck? What about the pastor who assigns his confirmands to memorize Matthew 10:37, *Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me*, but then claims to their parents that he has a "call" from God to be a husband and father that supersedes his call to be a pastor? What about the called workers who *say* the right things about the privileges of the ministry, but who *show* lives of frenzied workaholism or frazzled world-weariness?

It is fair to say that when the Savior calls a believer to service in the public ministry, it is a call to a life that, in the eyes of the world, is worthy of low esteem. That is the truth. It is not, however, the whole truth. The truth is that Jesus warned his disciples, "*All the world will hate you because of me,*" but the whole truth is that Jesus went on in his very next breath to add "*...but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.*" (Mt 10:22) The truth is that the Savior wants his servants to think hard about the reality that "*Anyone who loves father or mother more than (Jesus) is not worthy of (him) and anyone who loves his son or daughter more than (Jesus) is not worthy of (him) and anyone who does not take up his cross and follow (Jesus) is not worthy*

of (him)'' (Mt 10:37-38). But the whole truth is that Jesus also reassures his servants with the promise that "everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for (Jesus') sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit the kingdom of heaven." (Mt 19:29)

The truth is that, at times, service in the public Gospel ministry can be a cross and no recruiter to that ministry would be either right or wise to conceal that fact. But the *whole* truth is that, at many more times, service in the public Gospel ministry is a rare and precious privilege, one by which God permits mere mortals to wield immortal power -- power that touches hearts, that changes lives, that replaces sorrow with joy, grief with comfort, fear with boldness, turmoil with peace, power that turns guilty sinners like you and me into forgiven believers like you and me. Far more than anything about our paltry selves, the public ministry is about the all-surpassing power of God's gospel. That is the whole truth.

Prospects for the ministry need that whole truth, and no one can present it to them as directly, personally, or persuasively as those whom God has called to tell the truth. Some of the most eloquent recruitment presentations ever made have come without any words every being spoken, from God's called servants who simply do their work faithfully, love their people openly, proclaim God's Word boldly, and expect its blessings confidently. We can petition our God for no greater blessing on our recruitment efforts than that he enable those who now publicly serve him among us to let their ministries tell the whole truth.

VI. God recruits with promises of support

Curt was one of the first of "my boys" to make it through, coming from the first crop of MLS students I was able to encourage toward the ministry. He was one of those multi-talented teenagers who could have done almost anything, but who came to recognize that the public ministry deserves the best. I got to know Curt quite well since I'd worked with him in extracurricular activities at Sem and he had come back to MLS several times during his NWC and WLS years to recruit other students for the ministry. So I had more than usual interest when Call Day came for Curt, and I saw immediately that the Spirit intended to put all his talents to use. His call was to a real "hornet's nest," a congregation where the former pastor had resigned, leaving both his and some neighboring congregations in turmoil. I sent my congratulations to Curt and wished him God's blessings on his challenging assignment. Some time later he told me, "Professor, when I got this call, it made me think of something you said once in a chapel sermon at Sem: 'The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God can not keep you.' I'm counting on that now."

It wasn't a Bible passage. It was just a quote taken from a little plaque my sister gave me before I left on my first call to be a world missionary in Taiwan. As a contribution to our Biblical perspective on recruitment, however, I think it's valid because Scripture does make clear that when God invites us into his service, he never expects us to go it alone. One of the strongest elements of God's recruitment message is his repeated assurance that he is with his called servants every step of the way.

We think of the words with which Matthew ends his gospel account, words spoken by the Lord Jesus himself: *Surely, I will be with you always*, Jesus said, *to the very end of the age.* (28:20) Without those

words, the end of Matthew's Gospel would have been a frightening one... or, at least, the task Jesus left with those he called to his service would have been frightening. 'Go,' he'd told them. 'Evangelize the world. Baptize them. Teach them everything I taught you.' It was a task perhaps attainable by the legions of heaven's angels, but far beyond the reach of the handful of believers to whom Christ gave it. Had Jesus left his last sentence unspoken, he would have left his little flock without hope, and every one Christ has called to his service from that time to this would share in that hopelessness. But to his Great Commission Christ connected his great pledge -- you will not be alone. I will be with you. Always.

To many prospects, the public ministry can look like a very solitary profession. No one is with you when you stand in the pulpit, or in front of the classroom, or by the sick bed, or at the grave side. There's no one there to share the load when you take on the burden of a family's disfunctions, or a child's fears, or a member's cares. You can't call in a specialist to fix what you break or clean up what you spill. You're on your own... or so it appears.

While we can't point out to prospects the One we know is constantly beside us, we can point out his promises to never leave our side. When God lets us speak to prospects and recruit them to his service, we do well to let them know we never work solo. The Word is filled with God's promises to support those who serve him. One source for many of them can be found in Christ's words to his disciples just before he sent them out two by two. In directing and encouraging his disciples, Jesus addressed questions common to many who are recruited to serve the Savior: *How can I speak God's truth before strangers? When you are brought before the synagogues, rulers, and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.* (Lk 12:11-12). *Will I still be able to take care of myself if I do that work? Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear.Consider the ravens. They do not sew or reap; they have no storerooms or barns; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds!* (Lk 12:22-24) *What if people reject me? If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. ...All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.* (Mt 10:14+22) *But I'm afraid that I'll mess up! Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.* (Lk 12:32)

A graphic illustration of the blessings of God's presence in the life and work of a public minister can be drawn from the life of Martin Luther. We know that he, like so many other public servants of the Word before and after him, dreaded the thought of serving without the steadfast support of his Lord. In his popular sacristy prayer, Luther wrote:

Lord God, you have placed me in your church as a bishop and pastor. You see how unfit I am to administer this great and difficult office. Had I been without help from you, I would have ruined every-thing long ago. Therefore, I call on you. I gladly offer my mouth and heart and hands to your service. I wish to

teach your people, and I myself wish to continue to learn. To this end I meditate daily on your holy word. Use me, dear Lord, as your instrument. Only do not forsake me; for if I were to continue alone, I would quickly make a mess out of everything. (*Plass, II, 2903*)

Luther knew and prospects for the ministry need to learn that, yes, servants of God may at times be called upon to declare, "Here I stand." But even then, even at their most solitary moments, no servant of God ever stands alone. *Surely, says the Savior, I will be with you. Always.*

VII. God recruits with an eye toward eternity

Greg said yes to recruitment. He was firmly on a path toward the pastoral ministry, but he was interrupted en route on a sunny afternoon when an unpreventable accident at a track meet sent him to the hospital and an unforeseeable blood clot took his young life. Sarah said yes to recruitment. She had completed the first two years of her classroom work at New Ulm and was looking forward to getting into her methods courses. Then, in a moment, an auto accident turned Sarah's trip home to mom and dad into a trip home to Jesus. Alex said yes to recruitment. His training for the pastoral ministry had only one year remaining. While some of his Sem school mates were on an Easter choir tour at my congregation in Florida, Alex was relaxing at home in Michigan. He went to sleep in his bed one night and he woke up in heaven.

Why? Why would God go to all the trouble of drawing a sinful heart away from guilt and unbelief to repentance and faith, and then nurturing that heart to the point that it opens to the prospect of service in the public ministry, only to stop that heart by calling away the soul? We all know or have heard of someone like Greg or Sarah or Alex, so it's likely we've all asked ourselves that question.

We can't possibly know every answer that may exist in the mind of God, but it seems clear at least that with these three young lives and others like them God is showing us that recruitment to the public ministry can never be focused simply on this life. What Greg, Sarah, and Alex were privileged to discover sooner than the rest of us is that what God really recruits for is the life to come.

It is easy enough for recruitment strategies to grow out of, or at least be bound to, the plans *we* make and the objectives *we* set and the mission *we* define for what we want our church to be and how we want our church to grow. When that happens, however, recruitment for us is in danger of becoming little more than it was for those Tri-Valley athletic directors we spoke about back at the beginning -- that is, just another way to promote our plan and populate our program. That is a perspective on recruitment that is distinctly unbiblical. So, to help us remember that recruitment to the public Gospel ministry isn't really about *us* or *our* plans or even *our* church, the Lord periodically sends us little reminders with names like Greg and Sarah and Alex.

They help us remember, as the anonymous writer to the Hebrews does, too, that "*here we have no enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come*" (13:14), that we "*look forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*" (11:10) They help us recall that, in that New Jerusalem, where "*the dwelling of God is with men*" (Re 21:3), service to the Savior in public ministry will be the endless

joy and privilege of every immortal soul. And they lead us to appreciate the fact that those who are called to serve in the public ministry already here on earth are being permitted nothing less than a foretaste of heaven. As Paul explained, now *"we know in part and we prophecy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfection disappears. ...Now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."* (1 Co 13:9,10,12)

When we have occasion to recruit, we do well not to lean our appeal too heavily upon the condition of the synod or the goals of the synod or what the synod needs or what the synod offers. Lift the eyes of the prospect rather higher than that... to that public ministry that may begin in this life but that belongs to eternal life. That ministry in which Greg and Sarah and Alex continue to serve.

VIII. Concluding Thoughts

Last week another group of grade school children came to visit the MLS campus. Like hundreds of others before them this year, they were asked to fill out a brief Visitor Form and respond to a few survey questions. Where are you from? Have you visited MLS before? Are you planning to attend? Have you ever thought about becoming a pastor? Answers to that last question brought a happy surprise. Seven grade school boys not only read the question, not only understood the question, not only responded to the question, but checked YES.

Recruitment -- frankly, I don't know if you understand that word any better now than you did sixteen pages ago. I don't know if I do. That probably isn't so important, however. I doubt that being able to *define* recruitment would make us any better at *doing* it.

But the stated task of this paper was to enhance our *Biblical perspective* on recruitment to the public Gospel ministry. Is it possible to sum up the sort of perspective this paper hoped to present? I think so; in fact, I think it can be done in two words. The scriptural view of recruitment that I hope you have found in these pages is simply one of *humble gratitude*.

I speak of the sort of humble gratitude that we discover in these words of St. Paul: *"I became a servant of this Gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ"* (Ep 3:7+8). It is humble gratitude that recognizes that we have this ministry not because of anything worthwhile in us, and that we invite others to join us in this ministry not because of anything worthwhile in them. Rather, we serve and we invite others to serve because God is gracious and he allows it.

I have made a deliberate effort in this paper not to speak about statistics, projections, and developing trends. Such numbers have their place in the work of recruitment to the ministry, but they offer little that can help us nurture a perspective of humble gratitude. So often the sort of numbers that concern us -- 100 pastoral vacancies, 29 men in the first year class at Mequon, 50% of prep students not going on to MLC -- just end up

being ways of counting what we do not have. These numbers are issues in recruitment but they are not arrows. They can not tell us what to do. They dare never become motives.

If we want a number that can serve as motivation, take the number 7 -- those seven grade school boys who admitted they have thought about becoming pastors. For there is no earthly reason any of them should have done such a thing, much less be willing to admit it on paper. Considering the attacks of the devil, the inducements of the evil world, and the weaknesses of the sinful flesh, there is no earthly reason why any young man or young woman should ever consider seriously the work of the public ministry

There is, however, a most gracious heavenly reason: The Word works. In fact, it works miracles. Among the miracles are those in the continuing stream of young lives that the Lord of the church leads toward his service. You and I were once caught up in that current. It has carried us to where we are today and it will take us where we are going tomorrow. Likewise, it will draw others in our wake, perhaps others that we will get to tug into the tide with that time-worn invitation, "Come on in. The water's fine." We can do that because we know the Word works, and it supplies both our motive and our means for recruitment to the public Gospel ministry.

As the Lord Jesus looked out at the crowds, he saw them as harassed and helpless, like sheep without shepherds. He told his disciples, "*The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.*" (Mt 9:37) We also must join in that prayer in this, our own generation. But because we know the Word works, we may close our prayer with a full and heartfelt "*Amen*" -- Yes. Yes. It shall be so!

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Note: All Scripture passages quoted in this paper are taken from the *New International Version* translation, Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan.