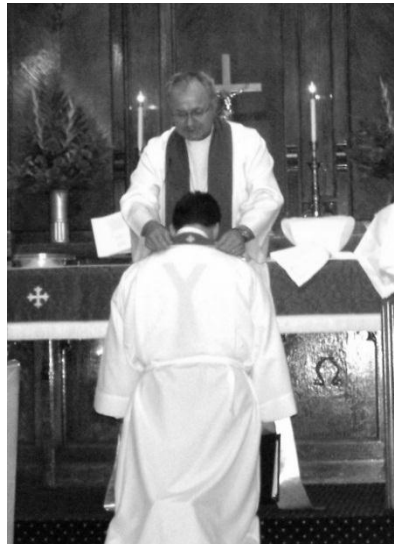


You Were Ordained for a Life of Growth

Pursuing Ministry Excellence by the Gospel and for the Gospel



An essay to prepare brothers in pastoral ministry for developing a spiritual and professional growth plan

Prof. Rich Gurgel

May 2011



You Were Ordained for a Life of Growth

Pursuing Ministry Excellence by the Gospel and for the Gospel

Go, then, take heed unto thyself and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made thee an overseer, to feed the Church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood. Feed the flock of Christ, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lord over God's heritage, but being an ensample to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd shall appear, thou shalt receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away. The Lord bless thee from on high and make thee a blessing unto many, that thou mayest bring forth fruit, and that thy fruit may remain unto eternal life. Amen. (*The Lutheran Agenda*, 109)

All of us heard these or similar words spoken to us on our ordination day.

Think back to that day. After many long years of preparation, the time had finally arrived to take the yoke of pastoral ministry. Fresh out of the seminary, you were eager to begin the task of pastoring that congregation. While fear and trembling no doubt were not strangers to your heart, it would also be safe to say that zeal for the Lord's house was consuming you.

But just as it has been true for public ministers in every age of the church, it is no small challenge to retain that zeal as the eagerness of anticipated ministry meets the daily hand to hand combat of the church militant.

Satan and his kingdom soon unleash a no-holds-barred attack on us. Satan's kingdom suffers grievous losses when gospel ministry is carried out with zealous faithfulness. Then there is the constant nibbling away at that zeal as we come to realize precisely what it means that until the day they die each soul entrusted to our care is *simul justus et peccator*. Then there are those out there in our parish area for whom we prayed to be the Spirit's tool to win them for the gospel, but so often they are unafraid to stomp on our zeal by showing themselves either disinterested or hostile to the gospel burning in our hearts.

But the greatest challenge to our zeal has not even been mentioned. That is the lifelong challenge of growing into the office that we just entered. In no other calling or profession is the gulf so wide between what we are and what we need to become. In fact, if we fully recognized the amount of growth needed for faithful ministry in the years to come, we might on our ordination day have gotten cold feet at God's altar and turned to run! Into our frail hands had just been entrusted the public stewardship of God's mysteries – mysteries whose beautiful contours at seminary we had only begun to trace for our own understanding. On that day we entered a ministry marked by the strange spiritual schizophrenia that makes us the aroma of life one moment and the stench of death the next. When considering that, even the Apostle Paul cried out: "Who is equal to such a task?" (2 Corinthians 2:16). What is more, we publicly committed ourselves before God and his people to adorning the perfect doctrine of Christ with a life that will show sheep inside and outside the flock what a heavenward walk

looks like. We make that promise even though each of us is also *simul justus et peccator*, struggling against temptations that can make mincemeat of that conviction at a moment's notice.

This mismatch between the holy office of public ministry and the one filling it will be true no matter how good our training was. Listen to August Pieper:

In no calling is anyone less a master after completing his apprenticeship than in the holy ministry. To be sure, not every candidate believes that; but the conscientious and humble young pastors very soon recognize daily how much they still lack in knowledge and ability for properly carrying out their ministry. The three years of theological study could only offer them that which is most necessary in doctrine and practical skills. Therefore our candidates are never released into the ministry without the earnest admonition to diligently continue their studies. For the faithful pastor, study is not suspended when he enters the ministry; rather, it first properly begins....Specifically the theories of the homiletical and catechetical arts, which cause so much trouble for the beginner, need basic study if one wants to perform somewhat capably in practice. The daily need to care for souls will again and again drive him anew into the study of the individual parts of pastoral theology, so that he becomes clear on how he should act and why just so and not otherwise. In brief, the daily practical demands of the ministry necessitate of themselves basic theoretical study, if one does not want to change from a beginning dabbler into a superficial bungler. (*Scripture Study as the Special Task of the Pastor, The Wauwatosa Theology*, Volume 1, 119-120)

If we don't recognize this mismatch and its call to growth into our ministry in every direction, the task before us will eventually consume our zeal on its way to causing spiritual havoc for us and those entrusted to our care. And the worst result of this mismatch is *not* necessarily a heartrending resignation of one who with a heart on fire on ordination day committed himself to the task of pastoral ministry. Without downplaying in the least the pain of resignation for shepherd and flock and family, there is something that can be even worse for the kingdom of God. That is the slow leak of zeal that finally leaves in its wake someone who spends years pastoring on autopilot. Zeal is replaced by a dull resignation to mediocrity in ministry. It is a dull discouragement that comes when a pastor has, for all practical purposes, lost confidence in the gospel to make any real difference in his congregation. With Elijah, his heart accuses him of being no better than his fathers as he sits under his personal broom tree waiting until retirement or until God takes him home. As a Lutheran theologian, he may even try to dress up such discouragement by claiming that the theology of the cross leads him not to expect much of anything. But again Elijah-like, he has actually adopted a view more in keeping with the theology of glory that confuses what he sees with what actually is.

If we would let such dull acceptance of ministry mediocrity creep into our care of souls, Mark Twain's quip about a friend would ring true about us: "Died at 30. Buried at 60." Unfortunately, serving in public ministry, the fallout is compounded since many may be following us. In the book *Resurrecting Excellence*, the authors compare the damage done by open sin in the ministry to what happens when zeal and confidence simply fade away.

Mediocrity masquerading as faithfulness is equally problematic for both congregations and pastoral leaders. When congregations and their pastoral leadership settle for the conviction that not much should be expected to happen, sights are lowered and expectations are diminished. Rather than the abrupt sinful brokenness found in congregational divisions and destructive leadership, mediocre congregations and pastors betray the gospel by failing to trust in the transformative, life-giving power of the Triune God's abundant grace and love. Mediocrity creates a slower spiral downward than outright corruption, but death and destruction are no less likely to occur. It just takes more time. (23-24)

Of course, as with every area of Christian life and doctrine, there is an opposite danger as well. There is a counterfeit alternative that often appeals to those who are most zealous in their ministries. Instead of giving in to self-doubt and discouragement, the pastor is determined by his own hard work and effort to show himself such a good and faithful minister that the flock cannot do without him. This path often embraces what is openly a theology of glory. Longing to be needed and craving outward evidence to validate his ministry, the pastor relies on a flurry of man-made activity to achieve the bottom line results that we as pragmatic Americans have become convinced are the marks of excellence. More than the pastor realizes, his ministry focus has begun to shift from bringing glory to the true Messiah, as he unwittingly sets himself up as a substitute messiah rushing to the aid of the church. Zeal for the gospel slowly and subtly morphs into personal ambition for ministry success.

Regrettably, we often lose our way by uncritically adopting worldly understandings. Excellence has become the Holy Grail of American culture. It is the aspiration of the athlete, the benchmark of business and industry, the essence of personal coaching. This culturally conceived excellence is strongly oriented towards success, as evidenced by the thriving "successories" industry that celebrates - and markets - its pursuit. Such "excellence" promotes individual effort and puts a premium on exceptional competence and skill.

In a world of make-or-break rankings, mission statements, and business plans, "excellence" is too often interpreted as the capacity to come out ahead, to exercise strength at the expense of weakness - indeed, to leave encumbering weakness behind. Such interpretation has crept into the church without any adaptation or translation into Christian terms, leading even pastors we would characterize as excellent feeling frustrated. (*Resurrecting Excellence*, 1-2)

Somewhere between the death of zeal that yields dull discouragement and the pathological zeal of trust in self and human efforts, there lies a true holy grail of zeal nurtured and empowered by the gospel itself. It is a growth in grace in which the same Spirit of God who called us into ministry molds and shapes us for the task to which he himself has ordained us. He teaches us to labor with confidence and conviction - and growing wisdom and skill - as he teaches us to live by faith that this Word we teach and proclaim does not return empty.

The *sine qua non* of maintaining such genuine zeal of ministry is the daily journey back to the waters of the Jordan - back to our baptism. There we can confess creeping ministry discouragement or over-reliance on self and human effort (often we may find much evidence of both to confess). Whenever we

return to our baptism we remember that the basic identity that gives meaning to our lives is not pastor or shepherd of the flock. There at the Jordan we remember that our true identity is that we are by pure grace loved lambs of the Good Shepherd. Ministry zeal comes from basking in the beauty that our identity before God has absolutely nothing to do with a grade on our performance in ministry. At our baptism we are reminded that our standing before our God has everything to do with Jesus' perfect ministry in our place. Buried with Christ and raised to life, we recall that it is not our lives offered martyr-like for ministry that renders our Father well-pleased with us, but the blood of the Lamb of God that has taken away the sins of the world. Yes, that includes the sins of his pastors. That daily trip to the Jordan frees us from the work-righteous burden of being judged before God on the basis of our pastoral ministry performance. That burden always leads either to empty pride or crushing despair. Instead, at our baptism, we are simply cradled again in the same pure grace we proclaim to others.

Dying and rising again in the water of our baptism, our Lord supplies fresh zeal and new strength to carry out whatever callings both personal and public that he has given us (husband, father, friend, pastor, etc.). In the waters of our baptism, we find waiting a gracious God who "gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:29-31). Freed from any need to prove anything to God or men, and fired with a desire to live for him who loves us, the task of growing into the ministry to which we were ordained becomes what **Resurrecting Excellence** calls a gospel shaped ambition. Growing into the ministry to which we are called now can serve its true end: to honor our Lord Jesus and to further the cause of his gospel.

Jesus does not say that hard work or ambition or respect and honor or planning for the future are bad things in and of themselves. Indeed, often the Scriptures urge us to work hard, to have a good name in the world, and even to plan to some extent for the future. Indeed, God warns us often in his Word that lazy indifference to work and responsibility in the world is a mark of unbelief (e.g., 1 Th 4:11,12; 2 Th 3:6-13; 1 Ti 5:8). The question is not whether such things are good or bad in themselves. The question is this: Are these things ends or means? Jesus dealt with the problem of ambition that had become a misplaced priority even in his disciples. They quarreled about which one of them was most important. Jesus showed them that their ambition to be first was good only if it was a means to another end and not an end in itself. What was the end, the goal, that ambition should have? Service (Mt 5:14-16; Mk 10:42-45; Ro 13; 1 Pe 3:13-18)! That's the one-word goal of hard work, of respect, of planning: service! It is service that is done in submission to the Word of God and in accordance with his commandments. It is service that seeks the good and the benefit of the family, the church, and society in general. It is service that always has in mind the honor of God and the benefit of my neighbor. It is service which is useful in displaying to the perishing world the peace and joy of the one whose life is hidden in Christ. (Daniel Deutschlander, **The Theology of the Cross**, 185)

Indeed, growing into the ministry into which the Spirit himself has called us is not an end in itself. It is not a proving ground for our pride. It is not in any way a competition with those who share in this holy calling with us. It is rather an opportunity to grow in zeal and ministry skill so that the gospel we know and treasure may be known and treasured more and more by many more.

It is such a zealous gospel-shaped pursuit of excellence in ministry to which our Lord called us on the day of our ordination. Our ordination was never meant to mark that we had now accomplished all growth needed for public ministry. It may have been a day to mark the end of preliminary study, but it was also a day that called us in earnest to find in the grace of God the power to continue our growth. Paul would urge us to be just as diligent and zealous in this as Timothy, so that, for the sake of the gospel, “everyone may see your progress” (1 Timothy 4:15).

This essay, and the planning tools provided separately, were developed to support and encourage each of us in the pursuit of that gospel powered growth. These resources are provided with the double conviction: in Christ God continues to bless you richly, and by his Spirit he desires to mold you into a tool in his hand to be an ever greater blessing to others. That was the prayer spoken on your ordination day. That is the opportunity his grace presents to you every day to live out that blessing in old and new ways. You were ordained for such growth!

The Goal: Growth in Multiple Directions

Growth in Being Stewards of Our Physical Health

Just as there is a theological challenge to hold the middle ground when it comes to the whole concept of pursuing growth in ministry, so as we come to this first sub-issue of growth (maintaining physical health) there is also a middle ground to hold here.

On the one side is becoming obsessed with physical health. Such obsession is often driven by an unbelieving world that is still searching for the fountain of youth as a way of denying its sin-induced mortality.

While the Lutheran pastor is not immune to a narcissistic pursuit of health, more typically the challenge for us tends to be in the other direction. When it comes to caring for the needs of the temple of the Holy Spirit we call our bodies, a double theological distortion confronts us.

First we must come to grips with the fact that self-care in general (spiritual and/or physical) is not sub-Christian or sub-Lutheran. How instructive it is to note that, in almost identical words, Paul urges the concept of paying attention to ourselves both to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:28) and to Timothy (1 Timothy 4:16) as he oversaw the Ephesian church. While there are legitimate times and places when bearing our cross means making our own needs secondary, to neglect regularly our own needs of body and soul may betray a deeper illusion. We may be giving in to a self-flattering messiah-complex that forgets that the role of offering body and soul for the sins of the world has already been fulfilled.

Bearing our God-given cross is one thing, fashioning our own martyr's cross from the self-created ruins of our health is quite another.¹

But even when we come to grips with the fact that caring for ourselves body and soul is not *eo ipso* sinful, we often have a second barrier to cross: not treating care for our physical health as an ugly-sister to caring for our souls. While it is certainly true that the needs of our soul are preeminent, we cannot ignore the fact that neglecting our physical health can have a devastating impact on our emotional and also spiritual health. Paul does grant, after all, that "physical training is of some value" (1 Timothy 4:8). A strange 21st century Lutheran version of incipient Gnosticism is at work when we ignore our physical health. We are in danger of becoming strange modern reincarnations of ancient Docetists: scheduling our days and weeks as if we Lutheran pastors only seem to have a body.

Multiple surveys provide strong evidence that we pastors may have spent some time worshipping at the altar of such practical Gnosticism and Docetism. A recent extensive study of American clergy funded by the Lilly Foundation for Duke University's Pulpit and Pew research project revealed some statistics about pastors that encourage us all to break a sweat more regularly.

- 76% were overweight (compared to 61% of the general population).
- 10% were chronically depressed (about the same as the general population).
- 40% were depressed at times or worn out "some or most of the time."
- The average minister worked 60–70 hour weeks with little or no exercise. (Quoted in "**Firewall: Health Essentials for Ministers and Their Families**," *Christian Education Journal*, Series 3, Volume 6, Number 2, 311)

The recipe is well known to us. Start with the affluence of our culture which makes almost any food we want readily available. Add in America's addiction to fast-food. Mix all this with the sedentary nature of much of 21st century pastoral work, joined with a lack of exercise to compensate. Season to taste with the habit of self-medicating after long days by downing large doses of our favorite late-night snacks and/or beverages. Bake this concoction in the heat of the pressures of pastoral ministry. And out of the oven pops a dish that is giving more than heartburn to many North American clergy.

Dr. Gwen Halaas (2004) notes that in 1980, a longitudinal study of 28,000 Protestant ministers that began in the 1950s showed that in every diagnostic category ministers lived longer than the average male, including those from other professions. A 1999 report of death certificates for ministers who died between 1982 and 1992 showed that ministers were in the top 10 occupations to die from heart disease (pp. 3, 4). In recent times, the high stress life and death issues that ministers face, coupled with complex leadership and relational problems, mixed with long hours and a sedentary lifestyle, have created a ticking health time bomb for ministers that can go off at any time. (*Firewall* 321)

¹ Those of you who know me may issue a fitting, "Physician heal thyself!" right here. And you would be right. Two trips to an emergency room suffering from anaphylactic shock from a sudden outcropping of food allergies was the latest wake-up call received by the author. As of this writing, an hour a day of aerobic exercise and weight and flexibility training has begun to turn around what needed attention for too long. I have not been back to the emergency room since. Coincidentally, I do not miss the 15+ pounds that have already been lost along the way.

But there is a better way beckoning us. It begins by remembering again that the job of Messiah has already been admirably filled. The sacrifice of our health by insufficient rest and ignoring proper diet and exercise only ends up shortening our ministries and reducing our ability to remain fruitfully engaged in ministry tasks. Those burning the candle at both ends just end up with less candle with which to give light to others.

As in so many areas of ministry, the key is dealing honestly with our creaturely limitations. Our bodies send us powerful signals as they cry out for sufficient physical exercise, proper rest, and greater sanity in scheduling. The God who created us body and soul, and who even more gloriously redeemed our bodies together with our souls, has much to teach us here too. Ever since the first day of this world's existence, the regular rhythms of light and darkness that God established has something to teach us. That world in these rhythms was created with man in mind. Even the physical dynamic of the Sabbath rest God established for his Old Testament people, though pointing clearly to a deeper spiritual dynamic in Christ, also has much to teach us about the importance of time away to recharge. What is more, we are the modern day disciples of him who said to his first disciples at the close of a busy time of ministry: "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31). Even though that attempt for some "down time" proved abortive as the crowds beat them to the rest stop, our Savior's concern is worth contemplating.

Allow just one more encouragement, while the Lord's Prayer clearly emphasizes that we are to seek the spiritual things of the kingdom of heaven first and foremost, sitting squarely in the middle of the prayer is the fourth petition. Think of what Luther so wonderfully taught us is all included in that petition. "All that we need to keep our body and life..." certainly includes taking prudent steps to maintain God's gift of health as he permits. In honor of the fourth petition, would it be too much to devote one hour each day to the fact that our souls happen to be attached to our bodies?

Growing in Caring for Our Own Souls

As important as caring for our bodies truly is, hands down the most critical aspect of legitimate self-care for ministers of the gospel is continuing ourselves to grow spiritually. Ringing in the ears of every public minister is the warning the Apostle Paul addressed to himself so that "after having preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:27).

And please don't set personal time for prayer and meditation on the Word in competition with more "professional" study of the Word. The question is not an either/or but a both/and. Yes, there may not be a greater source of growth for the pastor than the in-depth wrestling with a text in which our own soul has drunk deeply even before we dispense a single drop. This author has intentionally sought to be a pulpit assistant for twelve years not simply because he teaches homiletics and wants to stay in practice – and not only because there is great joy in preaching - but also because I would miss desperately the personal spiritual growth that comes from wrestling for hours with the text.

But we all know that the relentless ticking of the clock as Sunday approaches can rob sermon study of that critical element of personal spiritual growth. Time pressures easily turn us into fruit pickers who snap up some low hanging textual fruit because Sunday is approaching and we need something to say. That can easily become a pattern in busy ministry that leaves us as spiritual middlemen delivering

wholesale spiritual goods whose bitterness and beauty we have not tasted for ourselves. Our spiritual life easily begins to flatten out – and it will be more noticeable in our preaching and teaching than we may want to know. The *logos* of the sermon may still be *echt* (although probably quite shallow), but its *ethos* and *pathos* will be crying out that something is wrong. While we sadly can learn to turn a deaf ear to that cry, our hearers will instinctively know something is wrong, even if they cannot precisely put their finger on the root of the problem.

Yes, personal devotional time can also become rushed and formulaic, but the very fact that it is pursued for the sake of no other soul than our own - the very fact that it has no “product” we are looking to produce other than the cutting and healing of our own hearts - is of great advantage to us.

That is, if we remember one critical thing. It is critical that we approach personal devotional time in prayer and reading of the Word as those drawn by the gospel, not as those driven by the law. The natural *opinio legis* lodged deeply also in pastors wants to think of our devotional time as some kind of favor we do for God, when in fact it is quite the opposite. Drudgery and burden relative to scheduling and maintaining a devotional life fades away directly in proportion to the degree to which we recognize that we are being invited by grace to receive a rich banquet, not being driven like slaves to an onerous duty. As John Kleinig reminds us in his book *Grace Upon Grace*², Lutheran devotional piety is founded on grace beginning to end. The Word I study is a pure gift of a gracious God who condescends to speak with me heart to heart. Even the prayers I speak are pure grace as the Savior gives me the right to pray and his Word teaches my mouth what words to speak to my Abba Father.³

There is no other practice of the Lutheran pastor’s life more singularly focused on maintaining and restoring gospel zeal than our private time in our Father’s presence through Word and prayer.

Here let me urge you specifically to drop any self-imposed pressures in regard to the quantity of Scripture that you “must” read. A regular pattern of rapid reading through all of Scripture is certainly a good and wise habit to cultivate, but there are also times when a more unhurried stroll through a particular book may be the best medicine that could be prescribed for our hearts and lives. Don’t get caught up in your performance. Just as in public worship, the chief performer is our gracious God who comes to serve us with his best.

² Please see the May/June 2011 edition of *Preach the Word* and the accompanying online resources (including a review of Kleinig’s book) for more detailed resources in regard to recapturing our grace-focused Lutheran devotional heritage.

³ It is worthy of far more study in our midst to consider the impact that almost all of the study of the Word most of our work-training students have experienced takes place in the outwardly academic setting of a classroom. While every professor in our worker training system consciously seeks to turn that study of the Word toward more devotional ends, the very fact that it is a part of a formal curriculum with grades and required assignments works against that effort. When personal devotions in the homes of our members was still a majority experience in family life (a survey by the Lutheran Laymen’s League of the LCMS suggested that was true as late as the early 20th century), the more academic nature of study of the Word in our schools was not as much of a problem as it is today when devotional use of the Word in the home may be single-digit rare. Our worker training system was not set up to teach the rich heritage of Lutheran devotional piety since the assumption was that this was the work of home and congregation. The long term goal must be to recapture our Lutheran devotional heritage in personal and family lives, but the short term challenge for our worker training system needs further attention.

Remember also this: when it comes to the power of the Word we live by faith and not by sight. If we judge the blessings of our time in the Word only by how often we instantly feel renewed and recharged, or only by how often we are able to make an instant application to life and ministry of what we read that morning (or evening), we have judged by a far too limited visible criterion. Isaiah 55 reminds us that the Word is like rain and snow. Consider how long it takes for the snows of January to bring life to the frozen earth. Even in spring, April showers take a month to give us May flowers. Certainly, we thank God for those times he does fill our hearts almost immediately with comfort and encouragement for our souls. But remember, his Word is faithfully at work even when we cannot quantify it. "Night and day whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sputs and grows, though he does not know how" (Mark 4:27).

How important when planning my daily schedule to ponder that neglecting my own spiritual health may quickly render me unfit to care for the spiritual health of anyone else. When it is my own empty rationalizations, or my personal Messiah complex, that is keeping my nose out of my Bible, I need to repent. What I need most at that moment is to picture the open arms of my Savior bidding me in the most winsome voice: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Growth in Caring for My Mind and Hands (Growth in Knowledge and Skill for Ministry)

Now we finally have arrived at what most would think of first when we speak of growth in ministry. But before we delve into this area, let it be stated once more: everything that will be said below about growth in knowledge and ministry skill will easily be rendered useless (or even counter-productive) if physically we are falling apart and/or spiritually we are running on empty. To feed our mind and to train our hands, all the while neglecting the crying needs of body and soul, is a fool's pursuit.

But when we are also attending to the legitimate needs of body and soul, then growth in knowledge and skill for ministry deserves ardent attention from the beginning to the end of our ministry. The day we consider ourselves as finished products in the knowledge and skill needed to minister to God's people does not mark the birth of maturity in ministry. It is the beginning of the death of our ministry. From the first day of ministry to the last, here too there will be room to grow into the office to which God has called us. Listen to the words of J. P. Koehler from the opening sermon for the 1925-1926 school year at our seminary in Wauwatosa:

Now before you is the definite calling in life toward which everything we work at here is aimed, for which all energies, all knowledge, all ability and being are requisitioned. Now you have to deal with the study that you as mature men are to work at in clear, rigorously comprehended resoluteness; a study in which we do not turn you out as finished products, but into which we can only introduce you, which you must pursue during your entire life, if your subsequent occupation is to accomplish its goal." (***The Connected Study of Holy Scripture, the Heart of Theological Study,*** The Wauwatosa Theology, Volume 1, 99)

Here again, a middle ground presents itself. On the one side is a careless satisfaction with basic beginning competency that often simultaneously abuses the truth of the inherent power of the means of grace in order to excuse carelessness in preaching, aimlessness in teaching, and cluelessness in leadership. On the other side lurks a selfish and proud ambition that seeks to grow in ministry knowledge and skill because it brings praise and recognition. As Prof. Deuschlander reminded us earlier, the key is that our zeal to grow remains a means to an end: serving eternal souls with the gospel.

Here what becomes critical for every public minister is a sane and sober objective evaluation of the unique package of the strengths and weaknesses that each of us brings with us into the ministry. Of course, here too we need to keep our theological bearings. At present, much sacred and secular professional growth literature focuses on what some call “positive psychology.” At the heart of positive psychology is noticing that people move ahead in their professions much more rapidly by building on strengths rather than trying to overcome weaknesses. As is often the case with insights from the social sciences, there is something worth pondering here. There is certainly value in building on God-given strengths. “To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” (Ephesians 4:7). In perfect wisdom, Christ has carefully measured out the gifts of grace that he has given us to carry out ministry. It is not true humility to ignore God-given strengths in areas of ministry. It can be thanklessness.

But humility does mean recognizing that whatever strengths we may possess have come as gifts of a gracious God. “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” (1 Corinthians 4:7). Thanksgiving for gifts received can quickly morph into a self-focused independent spirit that puts our confidence in our gifts rather than in our God. When public ministers turn their strengths inside out in this way, what arises is great potential for causing harm to our calling. The church of Corinth is the poster child for this problem.

That leads us directly to the counter-cultural kingdom of God insight of the blessing of recognizing our weaknesses. When our weaknesses send us running to our Lord for his help, that is when each of us learns to understand the glorious counterintuitive reality that “when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). Areas where we jars of clay reveal significant cracks and fissures are only a problem when we remain ignorant of them (sadly, there are times where our lack of self-awareness means we are the last to recognize what others already know). Weaknesses, when acknowledged, lead us to recognize our need for him whose “strength is made perfect in weakness” (1 Corinthians 12:8).

But there is another bonus waiting as weaknesses shatter the remnants of our proud self-reliance. At the same time as our weaknesses reveal our need for God, they also help us see our need for God’s masks. Those masks are our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ whom the Lord has put around us so that their God-given unique strengths and abilities complement ours. Often one of the best ways to deal with one (or more) of our weaknesses is to find those who have a strength where we are weak and to entrust that particular task to someone gifted by God for that specific role. As the disciples found in the busy Jerusalem congregation, Jesus had not selected them because they were whizzes at administering food distributions for needy widows. But they found others full of the Spirit and wisdom

for whom such skills of administration did fit their gifts, thereby freeing them for what they had actually been trained by Jesus to do: devoting themselves to the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6).

The presentation of strengths and weaknesses is intentionally left relatively short here since the appendices of this document provide tools that invite every pastor to spend some careful time in an honest and humble evaluation of strengths and weaknesses.

But allow one more word of caution before moving on: it is a key element of spiritual leadership to delegate to minimize our areas of weakness by finding those with corresponding strengths. However, if we find that the tasks we routinely delegate are not just in areas of weakness, but are in areas of ministry our sinful nature finds “unpleasant” or “beneath us” (in other words: dumping on others all the “dirty jobs”), then we would be wise to get our hands dirty more often in precisely those tasks. Otherwise what may be lurking beneath the skill of delegation is an unwillingness to take up our cross. The gospel can give zeal even for that which may bring pain and sadness to our hearts.

Growth in Managing Ourselves in Time

As we discuss managing ourselves in time, we have come to what is really a pivotal ministry skill. How we manage ourselves in God’s gift of time impacts everything else we have listed so far. While staying spiritually well-fed may be the most important single ingredient in helping a pastor to fan into flame his zeal for ministry, poor management of our time may often rob us of the opportunities to save sufficient time to be in the Word.

Here again, each one of us needs to check our natural tendency. Is it to over-work and hyperactivity? Or is our temptation to laziness and squandering large chunks of time? While all stereotypes are dangerous, it seems fair to suggest that there may be some general trends noticeable among pastors of different generational cohorts. Among baby-boomers, the temptation is often great to begin to draw our identity more from our work rather than remaining focused on who we are in Christ. As we feel the pressure to perform to live up to our image of “the faithful pastor,” that can often lead to ignoring healthy boundaries of saving time for spouse and children, and giving attention to healthy patterns for exercise and rest, for sleep and recreation. The unspoken expectation may be that anyone who works less than 60 hours per week, and who doesn’t immediately leap at every hint of the bleating of a potentially bleeding sheep, is proving himself nothing but a hireling.

And while there are plenty of pastors of the younger generations who have followed that same pattern along with their boomer elder-brothers, there does also seem to be a significant cadre of pastors from younger generations, who, as one president of another seminary said in an interview, are “protecting themselves from the church.” Having watched too many fathers or older mentors sacrifice their marriage or their children or their health on the altar of what they perceived to be ministry faithfulness, some younger pastors may lean too far the other way and fall off the other side of the donkey. Ministry regularly begins to come in a poor second, third, or fourth behind children or spouse or self. Healthy

boundaries morph into high fences that begin to turn the ministry into a 9-5 profession with unbreakable office hours.

To be fair, within the sinful heart of any of us from any generation, both tendencies can come quite naturally. Maintaining a proper balance among all the callings God has given us is not some destination at which wise pastors can arrive. It is instead a constant challenge of balancing and rebalancing as each week's needs – and unforeseen emergencies – reveal themselves. As frail jars of clay, it will always remain a struggle to honor all the holy callings God has entrusted to us.

While a much more detailed presentation on managing ourselves in time recently appeared in ***Preach the Word*** (see Volume 14, Number 4) and its accompanying online resources, here are some brief encouragements.

First, we live in a digital age. As with any gift in this life other than the gospel, that can be both blessing and curse. Chief among the blessings of digital technology may be our ability to communicate with ease (and with every little expense) with almost anyone around the globe. Family and friends separated by multiple time zones and thousands of miles can be brought together virtually no matter where they live.

But almost limitless connectivity is also a curse. How easy to get caught up in responding to one interesting but interrupting email or text message after another. Email and text messaging creates the unrealistic expectation for the sender that what was sent off so quickly and easily should be able to be answered as quickly and easily by the recipient. And those on the receiving end – senders themselves of endless emails and texts – are well aware of that expectation. The recipient then easily gets caught up in the constant pressure to respond *right now* no matter how much it distracts from more important tasks! Afraid of appearing disinterested, we become more and more distracted as whoever fills our inbox writes our schedule for the day. Listen to the confession of one self-described “techno geek.”

I'm a techno geek. I was one of the original Mac owners and have an iPhone. I'm on Facebook; I tweet, text, e-mail, blog; I love electronic gadgets. I found, however, that technology was enslaving me. So I often don't check e-mail or CNN until after lunch on days when I have reserved the mornings for study or writing. This frees my mind and helps me focus on important tasks at hand rather than on returning the latest message or thinking about current world events. (Research has shown that the average worker is interrupted every eleven minutes and takes twenty-five minutes to refocus back on his job. I found that to be generally true in my life when I compulsively check e-mail.) (Charles Stone, ***Five Ministry Killers and How to Defeat Them***, 154)

The second critical encouragement is this: develop a proactive weekly scheduling routine that allows you to get to your schedule before anyone else does. There is almost no better use of an hour near the end of the week than to take time to plan the next week's schedule before the din of each day's urgent cries for our attention distract us from what may be a higher ministry priority. Instead of allowing the daily pressures to drive our schedule, how critical to consider all the different callings God has given us (child of God, husband, father, pastor, friend, extended family member, member of synod, etc.). Having what is truly important and urgent scheduled into our calendar can help give us the courage to speak a

polite “No!” to that which cannot fit into the schedule without displacing what is more urgent and important.

For those of us who find “No!” almost a dirty word, it can be helpful to remember that since God has given us only a limited amount of time, every “Yes!” is in reality a “No!” to something else. How critical that we do not let what is truly important be squeezed out of our schedules simply because we lacked the foresight to plan or the courage to guard the plan once made. We are in a very real way serving God and his people when we schedule and then guard time for spiritual growth, professional growth, rest, exercise, spouse and children. It is also critical to plan for and guard larger blocks of time for ministry tasks such as text study and sufficient opportunities to be out in the community for outreach. There is a relief when we know that time has been guarded in the week ahead for what we know are ministry priorities.⁴

It also pays to avoid what some have called OOPS: the overly optimistic planning syndrome. Many of us routinely underestimate how long specific tasks will take. Leaving some margins in our day keeps us from a sense of running behind day after day when the basic problem was that the daily “to do” list was unrealistically long to begin with.

In all of this, bear in mind that your schedule is your servant, not your master. The unpredictability of life and ministry means we must always remain open to change when the unforeseen ministry or family emergency leads to a legitimate abandoning of even a well-thought out weekly schedule. God is more than able to compensate for shortened hours at such times!

Finally, it is also critical to recognize that the biggest obstacle in the path of sane and sober time management is... ourselves! We set up our own schedules. That can be a blessing of pastoral ministry. When managed poorly, that can be a curse of pastoral ministry. Whenever we harbor the compulsive need to please people, we are in danger of abandoning priorities that will never get us any pats on the back. We too easily allow the day to be reprioritized by the fear of disappointing someone by saying “No!” Stone gives us all some sobering food for thought.

Recently my counselor asked me an awkward question: “Do you need to be worshiped?” My immediate response was, “Of course not. Worship is reserved for God himself.” But he just stared back at me, and that was my cue to rethink my answer. As I pondered his question, then and in the days that followed, I believe he touched on a temptation with which ministry can entice.

We all would agree that we must only worship the God of the Bible. To worship something or someone else is to ascribe to it the highest value possible, and what we worship reveals what's most important to us. Only God deserves this position.

⁴ Retired mission counselor, Pastor Jim Radloff, regularly encouraged the pastors he counseled to “schedule to their opposite.” If they were “people persons” who loved to be away from their desk, it was critical for them to schedule sufficient time for thorough study. If they were more “book worms,” it would be critical to schedule generous blocks of time away from their study and out with the flock, including the “other sheep.”

However, aren't we tempted to relish the praise "adoring" church members give us? It feels wonderful to be the center of attention, to meet the pressing needs of hurting people, and to hear someone compliment us. (145)

At times saying "Yes!" to one request after the next can have little to do with carrying out what is important for gospel ministry and may have everything to do with my ego. Making wise decisions to die to truly selfish aims and goals because of truly pressing needs of eternal souls is a cross to be borne gladly for gospel ministry. But we are fashioning a self-made cross when we give in to the compulsive need to please people, no matter what they ask of us, so that they think fondly of what fine pastors we are. Lurking close at hand under the guise of "servanthood" is sinful self-service. Of course, it takes the wisdom of Solomon to recognize the difference. Fortunately, God promises to grant just such wisdom to those who ask (James 1: 5).

Growth in Valuing the Beauty of the Body of Christ

Here we are not so much talking about the critical importance of equipping the saints and sharing the privilege of gospel ministry that Christ has entrusted to the whole church. That is a critical ministry skill all of its own for the health of the body. In fact, no portion of the body of Christ can move ahead in spiritual health and maturity apart from strengthening the living gospel partnership God designed to exist between public ministry and royal priesthood. Ephesians 4 most eloquently paints that picture for us of the healthy body of Christ striving for maturity amidst multiple challenges and threats as "each part does its work" (Ephesians 4:16). There may be no skill of managing ourselves in time more critical than multiplying gospel ministry by making sure our desk is not the place good ministry ideas go to die.

But here what is being emphasized is valuing the beauty of the assistance of others in the body of Christ specifically when it comes to helping us grow into the office to which God has ordained us. When it comes to wise evaluation of our ministry, recognizing our strengths and weaknesses, we can benefit greatly from the input received from spiritually mature lay leaders and ministry peers.

Here we encounter another perceived theological challenge that may occur to the Confessional Lutheran. Isn't opening up our ministry to the scrutiny of others running the grave risk of judging means of grace ministry by something other than godly standards? Won't this inevitably lead to purely human criteria judging what is divine work? We may even believe that we have iron-clad scriptural evidence that inviting others to help us evaluate our ministry is not only foolish but sinful. Isn't that Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 4?

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. (1 Corinthians 4:1-4).

What further evidence do we need? Isn't Paul ruling out of order any human court that wants to sit in judgment on our ministry? Isn't he telling us that the Lord himself is the only one who can give the sure and proper judgment on what is faithful ministry and what is not?

If, in the process of determining what constitutes faithful ministry, we allow subjective human criteria to overrule what God clearly identifies as faithful, then we have most definitely violated what Paul states here. That is precisely what so many in Corinth were doing. In particular, they seem to be using a very Greek love for humanly wise and persuasive words as the criteria for which of God's servants deserved their allegiance.

In other words, the heart of the danger is substituting human criteria when evaluating gospel ministry for the criterion God has established: faithfulness.

But that does not mean that God has erected some kind of Teflon-like barrier around his public ministers that allows us to ignore anyone who offers any evaluation of our ministry. I am abusing 1 Corinthians 4 if I act as if it absolves me of listening to anyone else who is seeking to help me to evaluate ministry faithfulness. The problem is this: the danger of using merely human criteria for judging ministry isn't just one that comes at me from the outside. Did you notice, while Paul was busy rejecting the faulty judgments of so many in Corinth, who else's judgment he rejected? His own! Categorically, no one has more trouble being *objective* in evaluating ministry than the one who is the *subject* of the evaluation.

So, if we recognize the inherent danger of faulty human judgments – both from others and from ourselves - does that mean that any and all evaluation of ministry before judgment day is ruled out? Is ministry evaluation a biblical non-starter?

It is certainly true, as Paul reminds us in verse 5, that the final authoritative judgment always remains the sole prerogative of God. Yet that does not mean that in the interim any taking stock of ministry faithfulness is categorically wrong. The key between now and when we stand before our God is to make sure we are employing godly criteria in our ministry evaluation. Only then will our initial evaluations be a faint but faithful echo of God's own final ministry evaluation.

But if we are going to use God's objective criteria of faithfulness wisely and well in any evaluation of ministry, then almost without fail it is exceedingly helpful to have the assistance of other mature Christians. We need that precisely because the hardest person for us to evaluate is ourselves.

Isn't that true simply because of the vagaries of our human hearts? Our uncanny ability to rationalize, our distortions of reality in multiple directions, our alternating ability to either see all thorns or all roses, leads to problems if we insist in evaluating our ministry all by ourselves.

Again, as with everything else in doctrine and life, I will tend to lean in one of two directions. In one direction I will seem to belong to the Lake Wobegon Evangelical Lutheran Synod in which all pastors are above average. Every one of us knows how to live in that utopian world of self-deception in which we prove ourselves willfully blind to personal weaknesses and failures – blind even to personal sin. Being

honestly self-reflective about our ministry is hard for our egos to withstand without resorting to some degree of protective rationalization. Here's one example.

Another survey on body care reinforces our [pastors] apparent myopia. The vast majority of us describe our health as good, very good, or excellent, yet the data from the same body-mass index survey indicate that 78 percent of male pastors...are either overweight or obese. (Stone, 131-132)

But of course, drunken-man-on-a-donkey-like, we can also quickly gravitate to the exact opposite problem. We can be blind to evident blessings God is pouring out on our ministry. We can convince ourselves that all we see is failure – and that we are responsible for it all. Especially in a church body with a firm grasp on original sin and on the fact that many actual sins are often hidden from view, we can submarine quickly into depths of self-flagellation that would make any monk proud. Suddenly we convince ourselves that there is nothing “pure...lovely...admirable...excellent or praiseworthy” (Philippians 4:8) to be seen anywhere in life or ministry.

Some people are temperamentally prone to excessive self-preoccupation and self-criticism, whereas others seem oblivious to their own distortions or failings.

We human beings tend to be a complicated mixture of self-assertion and self-abnegation, caught in webs of self-deception of which we are unaware. So also do we tend to fail to discern accurately our own gifts and calling. We often get the discernment partially right, but also partially wrong. Over time, we seek to learn how to narrate our lives truthfully in ways that will enable us to discover the life that really is life. We do so by locating our lives...in relation to God. Only God knows fully who we are. As we seek to identify how God is calling us to live by patterning our lives in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we discover how the particular distinctive story of each of our lives can be returned to us redemptively. (Resurrecting Excellence, 100-101)

For all these reasons, the assistance of those who can help us evaluate ourselves and our ministry objectively can be exceedingly helpful. Yes, it is critical that those who help us are able to recognize the danger of using Corinthian-like human criteria. It is imperative that those who help us are strongly rooted in the Word. Then they can help us make sane and sober mid-course evaluations of our faithfulness both with the means of grace and with our other God-given gifts that serve the gospel. Whenever we are tempted to bounce from pride to despair (and Satan is happy to lead us in either direction), the counsel of spiritually mature lay leaders and pastoral peers can be ministry saving and ministry reviving. At such times their input can be anything but human criteria to resist. Instead, what they can do for us is return us to being grounded in what is really biblical faithfulness.

I still recall my doorbell ringing several years ago as a good friend and fellow pastor stopped by to let me know that he had decided to resign. He seemed to be convinced that he was making a mess of everything in his congregation. It wasn't long until some brother to brother discussion revealed that this evaluation might not be entirely (or even remotely) on the mark. Fortunately he had not announced his impending resignation. He is still serving faithfully – both to his family and in the ministry - to this day.

As we seek to grow into the ministry into which God has ordained us, what rich blessings can come our way when others come along side of us to help us examine ministry by God's criteria. This is the body of Christ at work at its best. While so many Evangelical authors stress accountability endlessly, the Lutheran response is not so much to reject that out of hand, but rather we can bring proper distinctions of law and gospel to bear on the situation. My own uneasy question as I read Evangelical encouragements to find "accountability partners" is this: "Don't you trust the gospel to enable us to will and to do according to God's good purpose?"

What's often missing in their directives? The problem is not that someone else can help hold me accountable in the sense of helping me to use the curb/mirror of the law in regard to my sinful nature. That is most helpful. But what is often missing is allowing the gospel to predominate in this sense: the greatest gift another can give me is to help me measure how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ for me. When approached from proper law and gospel distinctions, the use of others to help hold me accountable and to encourage me does not need to reflect a lack of trust in the power of the Word – in particular the gospel – to work. Rather, just as we do for others, those others serve us by applying law and gospel to us. We all know how hard it can be to tell Moses to "Get lost!" when he has already done his work on our hearts. And yes, we also know how to turn the grace of God into a license to sin. Those who come alongside me can, Barnabas-like, help me to apply law and gospel in wise distinctions to my personal life and to my ministry.

Here is a very specific application to our ministerium. May the lone-ranger quality some have noted among our pastors always endure if by that we mean a willingness to be Christ-centered theologians who speak the truth in love no matter how unpopular it may be at any given time. But may the lone-ranger quality of our ministerium die wherever it means that we fail to make use of the support and encouragement of mature lay members and ministry peers. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!'" (1 Corinthians 12:21). Only the Messiah – in the working out of our salvation - could rightly say that there was "no one to intervene" (Isaiah 59:16). And even there it appalled him! And yet even he, during his exinanition, was heard to remark in Gethsemane, "Stay here and keep watch with me" (Matthew 26:38).

If any of you still think that any such relying on others is in any way unbiblical, I urge you to read through 2 Timothy and watch how Paul highlights in multiple directions the ministry and personal support (or lack thereof) that he received as he faced his final months, weeks, and days. His final plea to Timothy to join him as soon as possible, and to bring with him John Mark (!) pulls back the veil and gives us an intimate inspired glimpse of an apostle who in longing for the support of ministry partners was anything but a lone-ranger.

How foolish on my part to neglect the rich resource of other members of the body of Christ when it comes to being encouraged and growing in ministry! It is also enlightening to consider that in calling others to our side we have a powerful tool to defeat what surveys indicate is one of the top ministry discouragers. That discourager is loneliness: the belief, to quote the old song, that "nobody knows the trouble I've seen."

As recently as 2001, the Pulpit & Pew national survey [of clergy] discovered that..."loneliness and isolation" was the single greatest predictor of overall job dissatisfaction among Protestants and Catholics." (*Resurrecting Excellence*, 74)

How foolish to throw away the blessings of partnership in ministry that lay leaders and ministry peers can give us! God has surrounded us with his "ligaments of support" (Ephesians 4:16). Why limp along without them? My own confession is this: what gets in the way for me is not really my theology; it is my pride! Admitting the need for help is hard whether I am speaking to God or my brothers and sisters in Christ.

And what are the specific blessings of lay involvement in evaluating our ministry? What lay leaders from our own congregation contribute is the view from the pew that we can so easily miss. Especially when evaluating areas for growth in ministry knowledge and skill, we by ourselves might miss a pressing need that is more obvious to those who are the target of our service. Mature lay people provide us with a "target's eye view" of our strengths and weaknesses. Are our sermons communicating clearly? Is our teaching too often disconnected from evident application to real life? Is how we are leading the congregation failing to grasp what is needed at this particular time in congregational history?

What is more, there is the awesome potential to develop learning partnerships with lay leaders as we identify together challenges that need our joint attention and opportunities for ministry just waiting to be explored together. Much beneficial learning can take place right within the microcosm of the congregation as lay/clergy gospel partnerships are strengthened.

And what are the blessings of ministry peers helping us evaluate our ministry? Many even of our most dedicated lay leaders may have little appreciation for the rhythms and patterns of pastoral ministry and life in the parsonage. For such issues, those who inhabit the same calling to public ministry as we do can be some of our best sounding boards. They know the familiar excuses and rationalizations. They've used them too! They know the depths of pastoral discouragement that can blind us to the blessings of God's grace all around us. And, just as with lay leaders, the opportunities to form peer learning partnerships are limited only by our imagination.

Putting This All Together to Develop a Spiritual and Professional Growth Plan

Where has all this been leading? It has been leading to making use of a resource packet that has been prepared. The packet intends to be an aid to pastors in developing an annual spiritual and professional growth plan for ministry in partnership with lay leaders and ministry peers.

Why develop a spiritual and professional growth plan? There is certainly no requirement of this in Scripture. Some might even wonder if this militates against gospel freedom. It could. If followed in a slavish, legalistic way it could prove a discouraging burden or, conversely, as a source of empty pride.

Yet gospel freedom does not mean chaos. The gospel in its freedom creates useful forms that serve it. Just as the liturgy has formed through the centuries as a flexible and useful form, shaped by the gospel, to guide the work of the people at worship, so in a far lesser way a spiritual and professional growth plan could prove to be a useful gospel-inspired form to guide the work of the pastor.

But isn't it true that much growth occurs in ways we never planned – often when God leads us down much more difficult paths than we would ever have planned to follow by ourselves? That too is most certainly true. But remember this: a spiritual and professional growth plan is **not** telling God what **he** must do. He always retains the right at any time to dismiss or improve on our plans. And it is growth in maturity to learn to thank him when he does.

But what we are prayerfully and carefully planning is what **we** will do (*Deo volente!*) as we wait patiently for his blessing in the midst of our efforts, beyond our efforts, or even, yes, in spite of them. Planning for growth is not the enemy, and random, chaotic steps toward spiritual and professional growth in ministry are usually not our friend. Picking up a book to read because a pastor friend found it helpful might bring useful growth to our life and ministry. But it may also just reflect what was beneficial to him in his specific calling while having little or nothing to do with what is really needed now in our ministry. Attending random seminars to pick up bits and pieces may be enjoyable. But it may just put another dust-catching three-ring binder on our shelves that impacts actual gospel ministry very little. Attending circuit and conference meetings is a crucial way we have long agreed to work together for growth⁵, but if that is our primary growth plan for the year, we may be missing large areas in which our specific ministry is crying out for attention and in which we personally need to grow and stretch.

Planning also takes to heart that our God “is not a God of disorder but of peace” (1 Corinthians 14:33). Not surprisingly, God does have an uncanny way of providing opportunities for growth beyond what we could ever have foreseen. Often those opportunities for growth show up as surprising twists and turns on what was previously planned. God finds it hardest to bless those who plan for nothing and who expect little. No one achieves his plans more consistently than the one who plans for nothing.

But won't much that is planned never happen? Perhaps. It is quite likely that we will put considerable effort into forming specific continuing education plans that will not bear evident fruit. But even if only a small portion of what we planned bears fruit, might that not be much more growth than we would have experienced if our plan was only CE by serendipity? And don't forget the X factor: God may provide growth through what we study in ways we won't recognize until in heaven we know as we are fully known!

⁵ I have been to excellent small group studies, circuit meetings, and pastoral conferences. I have also been to many such gatherings that lacked real ministry benefit other than the critically important benefit of not losing track of my brothers. We have room for growth here to redeem the original intent of these gatherings. In a digital age in which direct communication with our ministerium is possible through so many media, those who plan such meetings need to rethink the wisdom of spending large chunks of agenda time in listening to one “report” after another. **Grow in Grace** is determined to provide samples of useful ideas for fostering growth in every kind of gathering of two or more pastors so as to strengthen opportunities for iron to sharpen iron.

The path of planning our work and working our plan is not being laid before you because it is easy. Satan and our sinful natures will always resist that which leads to their death and destruction. And, quite frankly, it is painful to break out of comfortable ruts – no matter how destructive we know them to be to life and ministry. What you will find in the planning packet is not a sure-fire path to some kind of ministry utopia where everything prospers and thrives. Our theologians have rightly identified such thinking as the most subtle form of millennialism. So what will you find in that planning packet? An opportunity to pursue a humble, faith-filled path that allows us to give careful thought and prayerful consideration to how God can enable us to grow into the holy office into which he ordained us.

My dear brothers, it is the gospel alone that can give us the courage to evaluate ministry faithfulness. The gospel can remove our fears about any less than faithful patterns we may uncover. Christ has already bled all over whatever we will need to confess as sin. And we don't even need to fear finding blessings and strengths – there too we simply attribute everything to the grace of God that equips us and then enables us to will and to do according to his good purpose. And most of all, we go into such evaluation and planning with the full confidence that we do so as those already fully loved by our Father, and, in the record of his eternal Son, those with whom he is already well pleased. In all these ways, the gospel gives us the strength to take on this challenge. And it is what the gospel will yet accomplish that gives us further encouragement to forge ahead. By the power of the gospel, and for the sake of the gospel, we are simply claiming the reality that we have been ordained to grow!

Go, then, take up the work to which you have been called.

The Lord bless you and make you a blessing to many, that you may bear fruit and that your fruit may remain to eternal life. (*Christian Worship: Occasional Services*, 251)

Appendix

Study Guide for this Essay

These questions could be used individually to help a pastor ponder the content of this essay, but ideally they would be used with other pastors at a study group, circuit, or conference.

“It is no small challenge to retain that zeal as the eagerness of anticipated ministry meets the daily hand to hand combat of the church militant” (2) What specifically do you believe presents the greatest challenge to holding on to zeal for ministry as the years pile up between us and our ordination day? What has helped you most in holding on to ministry zeal?

The essay identifies the ministry-long challenge of growing into the pastoral office into which we are called. Which areas calling for post-ordination pastoral growth do you consider to be the most critical?

We thank God for the blessings of our worker training system. But why might recognizing the necessity for continued growth be even a greater challenge for those whose pre-service training was good?

On pages 4-5, the essay speaks of a “gospel shaped zeal for growth” that stands in-between a dull ministry mediocrity and a frantic pursuit of growth for our own glory and honor. Concretely, what does such a “gospel shaped zeal for growth” look like in pastoral ministry?

On pages 6-7, the author mentions a double barrier that can get in the way of caring for our physical health. The first barrier is considering pastoral self-care (physical or spiritual) as sinful selfishness. The next barrier is a gnostic-like disregard for the fact that God created us as body and soul creatures. How real do you believe those barriers are for WELS pastors?

What do you believe is Scriptures’ strongest encouragement in regard to caring for our physical health?

What tools, resources, and ideas have you found helpful in taking care of your physical health?

What have you found helpful toward maintaining a devotional approach to Scripture study for sermons and Bible classes that keeps you applying the Word first to yourself?

How well do you believe we do as pastors in approaching personal devotional study of the Word as gospel invitation rather than legalistic demand?

What tools, resources, and ideas have you found helpful in keeping your devotional time in the Word a blessing to your faith and life and ministry?

What tools, resources, and ideas have you found helpful in growing in the more theoretical or practical areas of theology since seminary graduation?

Evaluating strengths and weaknesses can be challenging for any pastor. What makes it so difficult to do this well? Why is it beneficial to do such an evaluation?

What do you believe to be the greatest challenges that the pastor faces in balancing all the responsibilities God has given him in his different callings from God? For each challenge identified, what can help us meet those challenges?

On page 13, the essay notes that living in a digital age brings with it specific blessings and challenges. What do you consider to be the greatest blessing for our ministry of living in a digital age, and how are you making the most of that blessing? What do you consider to be the greatest challenge for our ministry presented by living in a digital age, and how are you seeking to minimize that challenge?

On pages 13-14, the essay challenges us to consider this very real difference. At times when requests come for our time and attention, we say “yes” from a servant’s heart for the sake of a real need of a hurting soul. At other times we can speak an almost compulsive “yes” merely to please people all the while ending up saying “no” to other needs that may be far more critical at that moment for gospel ministry. What has helped you to recognize the difference in your own ministry so as to say “yes” and “no” with greater wisdom?

What tools, resources, and ideas have you found helpful in growing in managing yourself in God’s gift of time?

On pages 15-17, the author identifies a theological challenge we may wrestle with when it comes to seeking ministry feedback from others (congregational members or ministry peers). What do you believe most gets in our way when it comes to using the gift of the support of the body of Christ in assisting us to grow in our ministry?

What have you found most helpful in making use of the gift of the body of Christ when it comes to using congregational members to assist you in ministry growth? When it comes to using pastoral peers?

If you have previously attempted to put together a written plan for spiritual and professional growth, what did you learn from that as far as what proved helpful and what didn’t prove helpful?

When it comes to putting together and making use of a written spiritual and professional growth plan, what is your greatest concern? What do you believe could be the greatest benefit?