

**Reaction to Pastor Earle Treptow's Symposium Essay,
"Brotherly Admonition in the Ministerium"**

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It has been my privilege to serve as circuit pastor, chairman of district pastor-teacher conferences, chairman of our synod's Board for Parish Services*, member of the synodical Coordinating Council*, member and chairman of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations, and for many years one of the correspondents who supply answers for the Q & A service on our WELS website. All of these positions have something in common that pertains directly to the topic that Pastor Treptow addresses in his essay. They frequently receive communication from people who want the office-holder to say or do something to fix a perceived problem the people are having with someone else in the visible church. And as often as not, the expressed problem has something to do with a member of our ministerium.

In the majority of cases these people who wanted me to deal with a purportedly problematic member of our ministerium had not dealt directly with the antagonist. And in a significant number of instances, the people who contacted me were members of the ministerium themselves. Repeatedly I reminded them that their responsibility and privilege was first to take the matter up with the other person. Repeatedly I learned that my reluctance or refusal to take up their cause brought disappointment and sometimes anger. In other words, I repeatedly learned that what Pastor Treptow wrote in his essay merits our attention and appreciation.

I wholeheartedly commend the symposium planning committee and Pastor Treptow for being instruments to bring this topic before us at this time and place. But my appreciation goes deeper than that. It was the *manner* in which the essayist went about his task and the *attitude* he exhibited in the essay that give me my greatest joy. In soliciting pastoral faithfulness to the task of fraternal admonishment, Pastor Treptow displayed a pastor's heart. In calling us to express love, respect, humility and gentleness when we counsel each other, he demonstrated the same traits. He exposed our corporate deficiencies with kindness and helped us identify contributing factors involved in our bad behavior, so his rebuke was tempered with compassion. He turned the call to godly repentance into a teaching opportunity that will hopefully serve a purpose long after the close of this symposium.

For the sake of conserving time and words, allow me to summarize features of the essay that I found particularly well done:

- The good and constant will of God that we admonish one another was identified and viewed from various biblical perspectives, lest anyone consider the task optional. (pp. 2-5)
- A wide definition of admonishing (to encourage and comfort as well as to warn and rebuke) was used, allowing us to see diversity of situations where we may function.
- A gentle and charitable mention of reasons why we fail to admonish our brothers invites and encourages self-examination and rededication to the task. (pp. 5-8)

* Both of these entities are extinct, at least in the forms that prevailed when I served. Those who suspect a connection between my serving and their demise may speak with me privately to admonish me.

- The listing of indispensable Spirit-worked attitudes we are to display while admonishing others leads us to see the importance of cultivating personal spiritual maturity as we seek to further that of the brotherhood. (pp. 9-13)

Worthy of special commendation is Pastor Treptow's appraisal of the use of websites and internet communication (as through mass email and social media) to criticize the practices of brothers. (pp. 15-17) Blogging and electronic posting of criticisms are not categorically condemned, but a fitting appeal is issued: Be very careful! This too often involves avoiding personal contact and communication with those with whom we think we disagree, and too easily can it spread inaccurate or inadequate information about a perceived adversary. Speaking the truth in love and in person is replaced with speaking my version of truth with barely a nod to love and good order. One of my responsibilities while on the CICR was to visit and glean information from official websites of other church bodies or blogging sites frequented by members of their ministeria. I was frequently disheartened – appalled is not too strong a word – at the spiteful and discourteous wars of words that were posted at sites proclaiming to be camps of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Scandalized laity periodically voiced their horror at the loveless diatribes, but the clergy bloggers never seemed to care. What Pastor Treptow has written merits our thoughtful consideration.

Similarly, I give a nod of appreciation to the essayist for including a section on memorializing conventions within our fellowship. (p. 18) When the memorial weighs in on the doctrine and practice of others, it should be assumed that those who submit the memorial have already spoken privately with the brothers being criticized and exhausted avenues to resolve the issue in less public forums. The key concern remains: It is our responsibility to treat the brotherhood with love and respect, with a serious view to orderliness particularly when so many observers are potentially involved.

The essay devotes significant space to the “synodical system of admonition.” (pp. 19-22) There is a fitting call that we gratefully acknowledge and make use of called representatives of and within the church body in matters of admonition and discipline that defy resolution at the personal and local level. I appreciated the essayist’s plea that we show respect and trust to our leaders as they devote time and energy to resolve often complicated and complex matters that come before them. “Acknowledge that you may not be aware of the details the way they are” (p. 22) is a particularly apropos urging. In the same way that parish pastors are often second-guessed and criticized by people who lack knowledge of information learned behind closed doors and governed by principles of confidentiality, district and synodical personnel may also be wrongly faulted while acting responsibly.

“Let me say this most positively. Receiving admonition is an area in which there is great potential for growth in our circles.” (p. 23) These sentences and the paragraphs that follow deserve special mention. So-called rugged (and often ragged) individualism has been observed in our clergy roster for a long time, often exhibiting unwillingness to receive or appreciate counsel from others. The biblical call not to think too highly of ourselves and to value the contributions of siblings in Christ remains vitally pertinent to our synodical walking together.

No essay can provide recommended applications for all situations that call for fraternal admonition. It is enough to highlight the Lord's overarching will for us all and to review principles that will always govern the when and the how of that work, generally speaking. Specific applications will vary and reflect variables peculiar to a given circumstance. This reality may come to mind when we read near the bottom of page 24: "In love I will want to give up my 'rights' for the sake of a brother. I will want to change my practice for the sake of showing love to a brother who may be troubled by it. If I am asked by a district president or the synod president, for the sake of unity and peace, to discontinue a particular practice, I will want to do so, even if the practice might be defensible." Generally speaking this is counsel well stated. One can also envision situations, however, when those "troubled" by a practice may be more fussy and finicky than insightful, and the one seeking "unity and peace" might be furthering a tyranny of the touchy.

Then what? There is no one answer that will adequately cover all possible circumstances. But there is one recommendation that will play a role in all situations: Make use of mutual admonition and include those brothers in authoritative offices in that admonishing. District and synod presidents are, after all, brothers who need fraternal counsel just as much as anyone else. And if God mercifully allows us to foster and maintain "an atmosphere in which brotherly admonition is humbly given and thankfully received" (p. 25,26), this noble work may flourish.

May Pastor Treptow's essay and this whole symposium serve the cause of brotherly admonition in our ministerium and beyond!