

“CAN I TRUST THIS GUY?”: EVALUATING THE POTENTIAL FOR PASTORAL TRUST-  
BUILDING IN EVANGELISTIC OUTREACH”

BY

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## ABSTRACT

How can a pastor demonstrate that he can be trusted? Today's world is one in which the concept of interpersonal trust has drastically eroded. Societally, this is a serious issue. For the church, it could prove devastating. A substantial amount of a church's work is predicated on trust. It is a self-evident truth that the primary goal of every church ought to be feeding the gospel-produced trust in Jesus that exists among its members. But long before someone joins a church, its members, leaders, and pastors must gain that searching individual's trust. As pastors look to conduct outreach, it is essential that they are able to quickly gain a degree of trust within their communities. This paper will utilize interviews and popular literature to explore tactics and philosophies that are acclaimed as successful strategies for building trust. It will then analyze how a pastor can adopt such principles to increase his church's perceived trustworthiness, and how a pastor taking initiative in this regard will have a positive effect in creating opportunities to share the good news of Jesus.

## INTRODUCTION

Anyone who spends time pursuing the pastoral ministry will eventually be faced with the realization that this career can be a conversation-stopper. Whether it's sitting in the chair at the barber shop or meeting a new neighbor for the first time, pastors and future pastors alike become accustomed to a familiar pattern. The natural flow of a friendly conversation comes to an abrupt halt when the polite inquiry, "So, what do you do?" is met with, "I'm a pastor."<sup>1</sup> Such an unexpected response catches many off guard. What could be the motive for pursuing such an occupation? Someone unfamiliar with the profession might wonder if they can continue speaking with a pastor as they would a typical person, considering what hidden agenda might lie behind the friendly façade.

Statistics from Gallup's annual survey "Honesty/Ethics in Profession" elucidate the perception that American trust in religious leaders is dwindling.<sup>2</sup> The report concluded that the clergy is less trusted in the eyes of the American public than it has been at any point since the study began in 1977. At 34 percent, barely one-third of those polled indicated that their level of trust in the clergy is above average. Gallup's evaluation of the results is even more telling:

Members of the clergy were first measured by Gallup in 1977 and were frequently among the top-rated professions until 2002, amid a sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. While the clergy's high/very high ethics ratings recovered to some degree in subsequent years, they fell to 50% in 2009 and have been declining since 2012

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1. While this opening paragraph was written independently of Glenn Packiam's article in the 2022 edition of *Christianity Today* entitled *His Body Endures*, the strikingly similar depiction of a pastor revealing his profession only reinforces the fact that such interactions occur with surprising regularity.

2. "Honesty/Ethics in Professions," *Gallup*, 6 June 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1654/honesty-ethics-professions.aspx>.

as Americans' religious identification and church attendance have also fallen. The latest reading of 34% for members of the clergy is the lowest by two points.<sup>3</sup>

In the midst of a time in history when few professions are subject to more public ridicule than police officers, law enforcement was still given an above average trust rating by fifty percent of participants, drastically outperforming pastors. A similar study conducted by Integrated Values reports that American trust in churches has plummeted in recent decades, from 77 percent in 1984 to 53 percent in 2022.<sup>4</sup> These statistics only confirm what today's pastors perceive in their day-to-day lives: in the eyes of many, pastors are suspicious at best, and at worst, entirely untrustworthy.

Because pastor is a profession predicated on trust to an even greater degree than most,<sup>5</sup> this is an alarming trend. Unfortunately, it's not just a general disintegration of societal trust in institutions that causes people to distrust pastors. There are numerous shameful examples of pastors and other church leaders conducting themselves in a manner that rightfully calls into question not only their own trustworthiness, but whether anyone who bears a similar title can be trusted. Those outside the church can hardly be expected to draw fine distinctions between various sects under the broad heading of "clergy;" Confessional Lutheran pastors are rarely evaluated independently from their inter-denominational counterparts. As the previous quote

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3. Megan Brenan, "Nurses Retain Top Ethics Rating in U.S., but Below 2020 High," *Gallup*, 10 January 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/467804/nurses-retain-top-ethics-rating-below-2020-high.aspx>.

4. Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser, "Trust," *Our World in Data*, <https://ourworldindata.org/trust>.

5. Faith, at its core, is trust. If a pastor's profession may be described as faith-based, then it is also trust-based. Trust is central to everything a pastor does, whether it's trust between people, trust in God, or, as is most often the case, both. In describing Martin Luther's views on the first commandment, Robert Kolb and Charles Arand write, "Luther assumed that everyone has a god since no one could live without trust, which defined the core of human existence. The only question remaining is whether or not a person places his or her trust in the true God" (Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008], 68).

from Gallup indicates, a scandal involving Catholic priests does not spare other Christian clergy from falling under public scrutiny.

The continuing American trend away from Christianity<sup>6</sup> indicates an ever-growing home mission field. It also indicates that the average American community of today is less familiar with the functions of the pastoral office than in generations past. That which is common and familiar is more easily trusted than that which is unknown.<sup>7</sup> It is a widely—and correctly—held belief that America is becoming less religious and less Christian with every passing day. It therefore comes as no surprise that trust in American pastors is following a similar trajectory, as familiarity with organized Christianity and trust in its leaders are directly proportional to one another. A 2024 article from *Christianity Today* makes this very argument: “‘As American culture becomes increasingly pluralistic and post-Christian, we can’t assume that Americans in general default to a positive view of clergy,’ said Nathan Finn, executive director of the Institute for Transformational Leadership at North Greenville University. ‘Ministers must work harder to gain public trust than was the case even a generation ago.’”<sup>8</sup>

Pastors may initially shrug off the news that their profession won’t be winning them many popularity awards. After all, a pastor’s sole purpose in his ministry is to serve, humbly proclaiming to sinners the good news of Christ crucified for them. The pastor will recognize that his own reputation in the community is not the mark of a faithful ministry. Yet a reality of

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6. “Modeling the Future of Religion in America,” *Pew Research Center*, September 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>.

7. “Understanding What Fear of the Unknown Is and How to Overcome It,” *Medical News Today*, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/fear-of-the-unknown>.

8. Kate Shellnut, “Above Reproach? Fewer Americans See Pastors as Ethical,” *Christianity Today*, 25 January 2024, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2024/january/pastor-trust-credibility-reputation-gallup-poll-clergy-ethi.html>.

pastoral ministry is that public perception of the pastor is inexorably linked to public perception of the church and, ultimately, the Savior.<sup>9</sup> If the shift of the culture ensures that pastors can no longer rely on the positive public standing they once took for granted, a similar shift in the way pastors interact with that culture may be in order as well.

It is important to note that the loss of pastoral trust has not taken place in a vacuum. And while some research suggests that individual Christians are still trusted to an above-average degree,<sup>10</sup> it is the institution of organized Christianity which has lost respect in the public eye. Christianity may be a victim of circumstance in this regard, as the Western world has descended into a widespread crisis of trust.<sup>11</sup> Christians who find themselves wondering what this world is coming to will quickly remember Jesus' warning in Matthew 24 regarding the End Times: "Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold" (Matt 24:12, NIV).<sup>12</sup> While every generation likely has their own spin on what Jesus' words specifically entail, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Christian has no shortage of potential suggestions. Scammers can use Artificial Intelligence to mimic voices with such ease that a loved one's phone call for help can no longer be trusted.<sup>13</sup> Modern relationships are plagued by an epidemic of psychologically diagnosed trust

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9. Pat Springle, *Trusting: Learning Who and How to Trust Again* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1994), 225.

10. Michael E. McCollough et al., "Christian Religious Badges Instill Trust in Christian and non-Christian Perceivers," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 8, no. 2 (2016): 149–163, <https://www.doi.org/10.1037/rel0000045>.

11. Susan-Elizabeth Littlefield, "'The Trusted Leader' author David Horsager teaches leaders worldwide about trust," *CBS News*, 12 November 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/the-trusted-leader-author-david-horsager-teaches-leaders-worldwide-about-trust/>.

12. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical citations will refer to the 2011 edition of the NIV translation.

13. Carter Evans and Analisa Novak, "Scammers use AI to mimic voices of loved ones in distress," *CBS News*, 19 July 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/scammers-ai-mimic-voices-loved-ones-in-distress/>.



issues,<sup>14</sup> and public confidence in the reliability of news media continues to nosedive.<sup>15</sup> In an increasingly untrusting and untrustworthy world, it can be difficult to know where to turn.

A pastor who views himself as just another citizen in this world can't help but be alarmed by these trends alongside everyone else. Yet viewed through lens of a pastor's calling to share the gospel, walking into a world desperately craving trust might actually be an exciting proposition. A patient dying in a hospital bed is a terrifying sight to everyone except the surgeon who can administer the life-saving cure. Likewise, pastors can peer into the lives of people drowning in distrust, and do so with a gospel-wrought confidence that the perfect lifeline is on hand. The more trust dissolves in the world, the greater the likelihood that each person a pastor meets is suffering from a void of trust in their life. How much wider could God open the door for a pastor to demonstrate that he can be trusted to preach the truth? How much greater of an opportunity could he ask for to point wandering souls to the one who alone is truly and totally trustworthy?

Professors at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary regularly remind their students that graduation from the seminary signals the beginning of their education, not its commencement. This encouragement echoes a quote from Professor August Pieper: "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."<sup>16</sup> The seminary seeks to equip its students with the training necessary to enter the pastoral ministry. The concession that pastoral learning must continue throughout a pastor's

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14. Joyce Catlett, "Trust Issues: Why Is It So Hard For Some People To Trust?," *PsychAlive*, <https://www.psychalive.org/trust-issues/>.

15. Edelman, "2023 Edelman Trust Barometer," *Edelman*, 2023, <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer>.

16. August Pieper, "Scripture Study as the Special Task of the Pastor," in *The Wauwatosa Theology*, ed. Curtis Jahns (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997), 119.

ministry implies that there are some skills that cannot be taught within a seminary classroom. Realistically, even eight years of study could never teach a future pastor everything he will need to know for his ministry, and behavioral approaches that are likely to improve the way a pastor is perceived are hardly skills that one expects to learn in the classroom. In fact, becoming a more trustworthy person may not be an aptitude that many pastors actively consider in the course of a decades-long ministry. But as ministry conditions change, dedicated pastors will continue to contemplate how best to gain a hearing for the gospel in today's environment. Becoming more trustworthy may be a skill commonly understood to be implicit in the life of a pastor—or any Christian, for that matter. But in response to modern circumstances, in which pastors are no longer considered the pinnacles of trust they once were, it may be necessary to take deliberate action to attain and improve upon those innate qualities.

WELS pastors adhere to the biblical qualifications for ministry, and they live by the moral standards laid out by God on the pages of Scripture. These behaviors—walking in the light as he is in the light—inherently produce trust, as people see in Christians a reflection of their perfectly trustworthy God. Therefore, on a broad level, it can be said that WELS pastors know what it means to be trustworthy. What pastors may not understand is how trust can be intentionally built, and the effects that striving for trust can have on ministry. This paper will distill much of the secular research about trust and apply it to pastoral ministry in the hope that it can aid pastors as they take those intentional steps to be beacons of trust shining in a dark world.

While much has been written in recent years on the concept of trust—both the science behind it and the importance of developing it—these principles have not been specifically applied to pastoral practice. This paper will look to accomplish exactly that, by analyzing the pertinent research on the topic of trust and compiling that which is most applicable to the WELS

pastor in his pursuit of building greater trust in his ministry. The trust-related advice of various literary sources will be examined in the light of information gleaned from interviews with well-respected WELS pastors and leadership experts, in the hope that this study may be a resource for pastors as they continue to respond to ever-changing ministry settings. And while personal growth and development is sought in all professions by those with lofty aspirations, a pastor's desire in this regard is distinctly different. As a called servant of Christ, the pastor doesn't seek out improvement to stand out from his counterparts, create career opportunities for himself, or gain a degree of notoriety. The pastor pursues continual learning for the sake of others. The pastor recognizes the immensity of the task given to him, and he looks to honor his calling—and the Lord who gave it—by remaining faithful.

Developing a skill such as the ability to intentionally build trust will almost certainly pay dividends, albeit in seemingly inconsequential ways. Yet it's those outwardly mundane conversations—the ones which so many in today's world seek to avoid—that lie at the core of what it means to be a pastor. The pastor wants to know how to build trust so that he can seize the ever-so-brief opportunity in that conversation at the barber shop and turn it toward the cross. He wants to be trusted in the eyes of others so that his introduction to his new neighbors leaves them both assured of the character of the preacher next door and quietly curious about his convictions. A pastor can never know exactly when God will open doors and call upon him to proclaim his Word to the lost or to be a refuge for those who have nowhere to turn. For that reason, it is invaluable for every moment of a pastor's life to broadcast to those around him, "I can be trusted." Trust is more than a positive feeling or a blind reliance; it is a critical component of every healthy relationship that can be acquired through concentrated effort. This thesis will therefore seek to investigate methods pastors can utilize to intentionally build and foster trust in

relationships, especially as they seek to make connections in their communities, unlocking more opportunities to share the gospel.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic of trust has been studied extensively in recent years, leading to numerous publications on the subject. Within the specific parameters of this study, the skill of building trust has been a topic of much discussion. The resources included in this study were deemed by the author to be highly relevant to the pastor in his effort to build trust. However, little of the conversation has been directly connected and applied to pastoral ministry. The literature review portion of this paper will therefore focus on research conducted on the broader category of building trust in general. The body of the paper will then seek to apply that research to the work of pastors specifically, while also comparing the concepts and principles of trust taken from popular literature with the experiences of WELS pastors and leadership experts.

### **The Value of Trust**

Because of the obvious lack of trust in the world, business experts have noticed a clear opportunity to stand out from others in their fields and looked to capitalize on it. Stephen M. R. Covey and David Horsager are two widely acclaimed authors in the field of leadership who have identified trust as the pivotal component to finding organizational success. Horsager, founder of the Trust Edge Leadership Institute, declares in his 2009 book *The Trust Edge*, “Trust has

become the world’s most precious resource,”<sup>17</sup> and, “everything of value is built on trust.”<sup>18</sup> Covey speaks in superlative terms on the value of trust, calling it the one thing whose absence can have devastating effects on relationships of all capacities. However, “if developed and leveraged,” he says, “that one thing has the potential to create unparalleled success and prosperity in every dimension of life. Yet it is the least understood, most neglected, and most underestimated possibility of our time.”<sup>19</sup> Psychologist and leadership expert Dr. Henry Cloud bluntly states, “Trust is the fuel for all of life,”<sup>20</sup> and, “everything depends on trust.”<sup>21</sup>

A word as common as *trust* is sometimes left undefined, but most authors do provide their perspective on what the term entails. Horsager asserts, “Trust is a confident belief in someone or something. It is the confident belief in an entity to do what is right, to deliver what is promised, to be the same every time, whatever the circumstances. Trust implies being reliable, dependable, and capable.”<sup>22</sup> Amy Lyman, author of *The Trustworthy Leader*, describes trust this way: “We use the word *trust* to explain a bond that is created between and among people. Trust is an emotional and a cerebral connection, characterized by an ability to rely on someone to act in ways that will be of benefit to one’s own health and well-being.”<sup>23</sup> Cloud simply echoes the definition from the Cambridge Dictionary, which explains that to trust is “to believe that

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17. David Horsager, *The Trust Edge* (New York: Free, 2009), 2.

18. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 6.

19. Stephen M. R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust* (New York: Free, 2006), 1.

20. Henry Cloud, *Trust: Knowing When to Give It, When to Withhold It, How to Earn It, and How to Fix It When It Gets Broken in Life and Business* (New York: Worthy, 2023), 15.

21. Cloud, *Trust*, 18.

22. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 8.

23. Amy Lyman, *The Trustworthy Leader: Leveraging the Power of Trust to Transform Your Organization* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 4.

someone is good and honest and will not harm you, or that something is safe and reliable.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite the many varying definitions of the key operative term in this study, all sources are in agreement that trust has to do with confidence placed in others based on their character.

As both a clinical psychologist and a Christian, Dr. Cloud provides a unique perspective to reinforce his assertions about the extreme value of trust: “We have been created and designed biologically, neurologically, emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically to trust. When we trust, life works.”<sup>25</sup> Cloud cites human anatomy to bolster his point, explaining that trust is an essential component of human life from infancy: “*Oxytocin directs the infant to trust the mom, and vice versa.*”<sup>26</sup> Think about this: As human beings, our natural chemical makeup is designed to trust and to bond. We literally can’t help it. God wired us this way, as Scripture attests,<sup>27</sup> as a beautiful first step in even trusting Him.”<sup>28</sup>

Cloud’s perspective demonstrates that while trust is intricately intertwined with human emotion, it is more than just a feeling. He also speaks to this distinction directly: “While trust often begins with a feeling, it can’t only be based on a feeling, an emotion, or some kind of sense. It has to be rooted in more solid, observable, essential qualities.”<sup>29</sup> Horsager echoes

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24. Cambridge Dictionary, “Trust,” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/trust>, as quoted in Cloud, *Trust*, 12.

25. Cloud, *Trust*, 15.

26. Cloud, *Trust*, 22. Here Dr. Cloud cites the work of an unidentified “group of researchers.”

27. Cloud quotes Proverbs 22:9, King Solomon’s prayer, which states, “You made me trust in you, even at my mother’s breast.”

28. Cloud, *Trust*, 22–23.

29. Cloud, *Trust*, 14.

Cloud’s sentiment, stating that “trust is not a nebulous ‘feeling.’ It is quite simply the result of consistent, positive behaviors practiced over time and is therefore completely manageable.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Trust as an Acquirable Skill**

Charismatic leaders with charming personalities often seem to possess many unteachable attributes—“either you’ve got ‘em or you don’t”—and some may consider trustworthiness to be one such attribute. The authors cited in this study all unequivocally disagree with this sentiment, and it may be for this reason that trust has become such a popular term within the study of human social science. Trust is a winsome characteristic that, unlike innate qualities such as a warming presence or natural charisma, can be taught, learned, and obtained. Covey and Horsager agree that trust is often mischaracterized, sometimes designated as a “soft skill.”<sup>31</sup> Covey counters this perception: “Contrary to what most people believe, trust is not some soft, illusive quality that you either have or you don’t; rather, trust is a pragmatic, tangible, actionable asset that you can create—much faster than you probably think possible.”<sup>32</sup> Lyman writes, “Everyone is capable of acting in ways that will lead to the creation of trust. Everyone. When we act in ways that convey our credibility, show respect to others, and affirm a commitment to fairness, we are showing others that we are trustworthy.”<sup>33</sup>

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30. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 312.

31. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 2.

32. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 2.

33. Lyman, *The Trustworthy Leader*, 5.



While the experts in the field of trust all exude confidence in trust's attainability, they are quick to point out that, like anything worth having in life, trust does not come easily or cheaply. Building trust takes work. Horsager explains the intricate process that leads to the establishment of trust within a relationship, saying, "Trust is the natural result of thousands of tiny actions, words, thoughts, and intentions. It doesn't happen by accident, nor does it happen all at once. Gaining trust is work. Knowing that you need it isn't enough; you and I have to do the little things on a daily basis to earn it."<sup>34</sup> Trust is not made or broken only by the most significant interactions between individuals. On the contrary, trust relies on even the most minuscule of exchanges between people and builds gradually over time. Lyman explains this process: "Trust develops through interaction... The more the actions are repeated, the deeper the connection developed, and the greater the likelihood of a long-term trust relationship."<sup>35</sup> Horsager similarly asserts, "In every interaction we increase or decrease trust,"<sup>36</sup> a process which Covey compares to a bank account, with deposits and withdrawals being made constantly.<sup>37</sup> While it certainly can be daunting to consider that every spoken word and every observed action has a direct effect on perceived personal trustworthiness, Cloud argues that people are well-versed in this cycle, calling trust "the fuel and currency that makes all of life work."<sup>38</sup> And whether they like it or not, he insists that the trust-building process is unavoidable: "Trust is the most important tool we

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34. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 45.

35. Lyman, *The Trustworthy Leader*, 4-5.

36. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 168.

37. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 135.

38. Cloud, *Trust*, 23.

have in life, in every area. Nothing works without it.... It is *not* optional if we are going to have a good life or realize any kind of success. Period.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Principles For Building Trust**

When it comes to establishing the trust that they argue to be so fundamental, Horsager, Covey, and Cloud all suggest a multi-step approach to becoming more trusted. Whether trust is built by “Eight Pillars,”<sup>40</sup> “13 Behaviors,”<sup>41</sup> or “Five Essentials,”<sup>42</sup> the three authors’ perspectives share several common themes. In his widely acclaimed book that boasts over two million copies sold, Covey provides a guarantee that his guidance for trust building will pay dividends: “I have no hesitation in assuring you that as you apply these principles in your own life, you will see immediate benefits.... You will learn how to establish, grow, restore, and extend the one thing that dramatically impacts everything else in your life—trust.”<sup>43</sup> Given the subjective nature of much of their subject matter, these three authors rely heavily on their words resonating with readers based on past life experiences. Their credibility is confirmed only by citing circumstantial instances of their trust principles playing out, and by readers who recognize that the authors’ views are consistent with the realities of human relationships. The various steps of

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39. Cloud, *Trust*, 23.

40. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 3.

41. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 133.

42. Cloud, *Trust*, 39.

43. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 41.

trust-building as presented by Horsager, Covey, and Cloud will be collated in the following paragraphs.

### Competence

“Trust is tied to competency and capability. We tend to trust those we know can do the job.”<sup>44</sup>

While all three authors are of the opinion that competence is critical for trust, none spends considerable time arguing this point. The self-evident nature of this particular component of trust is a likely explanation for their brevity on the subject. Covey points out that competence may be an unheralded element of trust: “Most of us tend to think about trust in terms of character—of being a good or sincere person or of having ethics or integrity. And character is absolutely foundational and essential. But... to think that trust is based on *character only* is a myth. Trust is a function of two things: character and *competence*.”<sup>45</sup> Horsager makes the point that competence in one area of life does not guarantee overall competence, just as one would not trust their highly skilled auto mechanic to give a medical diagnosis.<sup>46</sup> Cloud shares a similar thought: “Someone can be a wonderful and capable person in many ways but not be someone we want to trust in a *specific way*.”<sup>47</sup>

Competence, however, is not attained by merely possessing the necessary qualifications to carry out a specific role; rather competence is defined by a willingness to continually develop

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44. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 123.

45. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 29.

46. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 123.

47. Cloud, *Trust*, 75.

and seek further education, constantly honing one's craft and improving. Horsager writes, "Trust is rooted in competency, and you can't achieve that without continuing to learn and grow."<sup>48</sup> Covey lays out the effects that such improvement can have on relational trust: "When people see you as a learning, growing, renewing person... they develop confidence in your ability to succeed in a rapidly-changing environment, enabling you to build high-trust relationships and move with incredible speed."<sup>49</sup> Horsager makes the point that continual growth is really an outflowing of humility as one recognizes that there is always more to learn.<sup>50</sup> A fascinating quote shared by Horsager comes from Abraham Lincoln, who said, "I don't think much of a man who is not wiser today than he was yesterday."<sup>51</sup> Competence is a baseline prerequisite that must be established before trust can exist.

### Commitment

Competence alone, however, does not automatically engender trust. There are countless highly skilled individuals whose ability is clear, yet they are nevertheless considered untrustworthy. In some instances, this absence of trust may be a result of a lack of commitment. Especially for those in positions of leadership or authority, it is imperative that they demonstrate their dedication to their cause and a willingness to fully devote themselves to it. Horsager points out that "it's the ones who stick with you when effort and sacrifice are involved whom you really

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48. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 128.

49. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 184.

50. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 130.

51. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 127.

trust.”<sup>52</sup> It doesn’t matter how talented or knowledgeable someone is; if they are perceived to have a poor work ethic, they won’t be trusted. Horsager explains that this perception may arise if a person does not make a habit of following through on commitments. Even small promises broken or forgotten will begin to erode trust. “Studies have shown that keeping commitments is the quickest way to build trust. Neglecting them is a sure way to destroy trust. Making a commitment to do something for someone else, no matter how trivial it may seem, creates hope in the other party. Keeping that commitment builds trust.”<sup>53</sup>

Covey makes the claim that keeping commitments is the single behavior that most impacts trust, calling it “the quickest way to build trust in any relationship... Its *opposite*—to break commitments or violate promises—is, without question, the quickest way to destroy trust.”<sup>54</sup> In order to set oneself up to follow through as consistently as possible, Horsager gives the practical advice of “under-promise and over-deliver.”<sup>55</sup> Covey adds that a pattern of keeping commitments is rooted not in public interactions, but at a surprisingly fundamental level: “Because keeping commitments has such an impact on trust... it’s wise to keep in mind that commitments to family members are often the most important commitments of all,”<sup>56</sup> because, “the trust you build at home is likely the most important trust of all.”<sup>57</sup> The value placed on dedication and commitment in family life will then flow into other avenues. Covey suggests that

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52. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 149.

53. Susan M. Heathfield, “How to Build Trust at Work,” liveaboutdotcom, 22 June 2020, <https://www.liveabout.com/top-ways-to-build-trust-at-work-1919402>, as quoted in Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 156.

54. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 222.

55. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 156.

56. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 226.

57. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 228.

opportunities to keep commitments, even small ones, can be intentionally sought out in an attempt to generate trust where there is none. “In establishing a new relationship where you want to build trust fast, follow this process: Find a value-added reason to make a commitment and keep it... and do it again... and again... and again.”<sup>58</sup>

In order for dedication to exist and hard work to take place, Horsager explains that a degree of passion for the work at hand is necessary. While passion comes and goes and cannot be the sole driver of hard work, it remains a crucial element of maintained commitment and motivation. “Passion is the essential ingredient of commitment. It’s never easy to persevere through hard times, but it’s nearly impossible if you aren’t passionate about the cause.”<sup>59</sup> Horsager also quotes the famously dedicated Thomas Edison, who opined, “Opportunity is missed by most people because it comes dressed in overalls and looks like work.”<sup>60</sup> If a person genuinely hopes to be trusted, that desire must coincide with a willingness to work hard and a persistence in keeping commitments. Together, these qualities demonstrate passion and dedication for achieving results in service of a greater cause.

### Character

While competence and dedication are indispensable aspects of building trust, the studied authors identify three categories which they maintain to be the most fundamental elements of trusting relationships: character, consistency, and selflessness. These categories should not be viewed as entirely distinct, but could be pictured as a Venn diagram with the word *trust* in the center, as

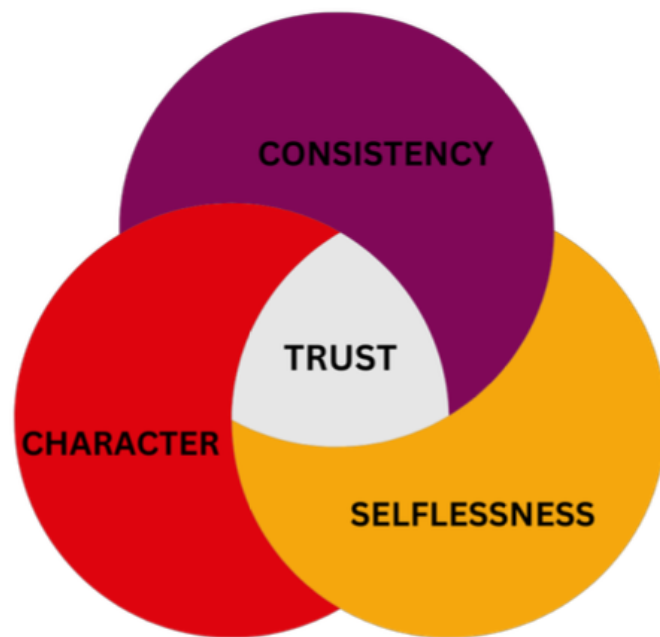
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58. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 227.

59. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 157.

60. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 188.

there is overlap among all three. The first of these categories for consideration is character. “Without character,” Horsager says, “there is no trust.”<sup>61</sup> Dr. Aubrey Malphurs, whose book *The Dynamics of Church Leadership* does speak directly to the concept of a pastor building trust, writes, “I’m convinced that people want, above all else, leaders of good character.



They want to believe in their leaders; they want to have faith and confidence in them as people. They want assurance that their word is trustworthy and that they’re excited and enthusiastic about the church’s direction. Godly character is the foundation of that kind of leadership.”<sup>62</sup> He later asserts, “A person with godly character will attract followers.”<sup>63</sup> Malphurs’ Christian convictions are certainly the primary driver of his desire for ethical behavior, and yet character is a concept that is invariably mentioned across all of the sources cited in connection with trust.

Like trust, character is a broad term often applied without a precise definition. Cloud distinguishes character from that which is only outwardly observable: “Character is more than honesty and ethical behavior. It also includes the personal traits, the makeup of qualities needed

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61. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 98.

62. Aubrey Malphurs, *The Dynamics of Church Leadership: Ministry Dynamics for a New Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 20–21.

63. Malphurs, *The Dynamics of Church Leadership*, 48.

in a person for whatever you are trusting them for in that relationship.”<sup>64</sup> Horsager identifies character as having two components: integrity and morality.<sup>65</sup> He then elaborates on integrity, which means “being consistent in thoughts, words, and actions.”<sup>66</sup> Cloud calls integrity “the ‘state of being complete or undivided,’”<sup>67</sup> clarifying that it has to do with “the whole picture of traits you need to be able to depend on that person.”<sup>68</sup> Horsager’s perspectives on integrity make for some of the most captivating portions of his book. He echoes legendary basketball coach John Wooden’s well-known definition of character as “what you do when no one is watching,” and applies it to integrity, saying, “Doing the right things when no one is looking creates the habits for when people are.”<sup>69</sup> Although *character* and *integrity* are often used interchangeably, understanding the distinction between the two virtues has value for developing them, and ultimately aids in building trust.

### ***Transparency***

A key component of *having* good character is allowing that character to be clearly seen. Multiple authors stress the importance of transparency in the lives of those who are trusted. Transparency, says Covey, “is about being open. It’s about being real and genuine and telling the truth in a way

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64. Cloud, *Trust*, 91.

65. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 99.

66. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 100.

67. Merriam-Webster, “Integrity,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/integrity>, as quoted in Cloud, *Trust*, 101.

68. Cloud, *Trust*, 101–2.

69. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 105. Horsager tells a particularly compelling story from his childhood to demonstrate the immense value of integrity. The story is attached in Appendix 1.



people can verify.”<sup>70</sup> More than just a popular, positive-sounding buzzword, transparency is a key cog in the trust-building process. “Transparency will usually establish trust fast. . . . Particularly when trust is low, people don’t trust what they can’t see. By opening things up, you assure people that there’s nothing to hide.”<sup>71</sup> Allowing outsiders to see more of one’s personal life can be an intimidating prospect, but it provides an opportunity for them to identify with shared human experiences. This disarms hostility and is a step toward trust, as Horsager explains: “People today are skeptical for good reason. They hate insincerity. Don’t be a fake. People want to know who and what is real and genuine. And if they find it, they trust it.”<sup>72</sup> While it can be overdone and must be doled out with discretion,<sup>73</sup> to reject being transparent is to miss out on a clear opportunity to create trust. As Horsager writes, “Transparency increases trust and. . . ‘trust affects how we interpret behavior.’”<sup>74</sup>

### ***Confrontation***

Being truly transparent also involves openly and honestly discussing personal beliefs and opinions. Shying away from the truth in a moment of pressure is a failure with which most can sympathize; nevertheless, it undermines trust. “Part of being clear is being transparent and authentic. Mean what you say and say what you mean. Share the truth. Those who are trusted are

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70. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 158.

71. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 159.

72. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 180.

73. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 161.

74. Patrick Lencioni, *Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Field Guide for Leaders, Managers and Facilitators* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), as quoted in Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 181.

candid; they aren't afraid to tell the truth in the clearest terms possible."<sup>75</sup> Covey writes

extensively on the value of confronting reality, stating,

[It's] about taking the tough issues head-on. It's about sharing the bad news as well as the good... and discussing the "undiscussables." As you do these things appropriately, you build trust—fast. People know you're being genuine and authentic. You're not shying away from the tough stuff. You're directly addressing the difficult issues that are in people's minds and hearts and affect their lives.<sup>76</sup>

The uncomfortable nature of confrontation is consistent with so many of the tenets espoused in connection with character. Character cannot develop without enduring such obstacles: "Like any element of trust, character takes time, intentionality, selflessness, and discipline."<sup>77</sup>

### *Developing Character*

Character, according to Horsager, begins at a deeply personal level, and is "formed by continued hard work and intentional effort."<sup>78</sup> That intentional effort begins with simple consideration of one's own actions, regularly analyzing, "Am I doing the right thing?"<sup>79</sup> Malphurs explains a common inclination toward complacency and lack of action in regard to personal character: "Our gifts, talents, and skills, along with our abilities to do, present a temptation. We are tempted to assume that the development of character will take care of itself and that we must concentrate on developing our ministry."<sup>80</sup> Horsager's solution to avoiding a self-destructive cycle that stunts

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75. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 60.

76. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 191.

77. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 101.

78. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 105.

79. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 105.

80. Malphurs, *The Dynamics of Church Leadership*, 35.

character development is maintaining control over one's own thoughts. "Trusted people control their thoughts because they understand that pure thoughts lead to good actions. Don't underestimate the power of your thoughts. If you are feeding your mind with garbage, whether it be cynicism, selfishness, lust, or a poor attitude, that is what will come out."<sup>81</sup>

Ultimately, character is a measure of self-control. High-character individuals "do what needs to be done, when it needs to be done, whether you feel like it or not."<sup>82</sup> The biblical principle of self-discipline is reiterated by countless voices, including former President Harry S. Truman, who noted, "In reading the lives of great men, I found that the first victory they won was over themselves... Self-discipline with all of them came first."<sup>83</sup>

### Selflessness

For Christians in particular, character and selflessness may seem to be nearly synonymous. While they are deeply intertwined, not every person of character is necessarily selfless. Each of the major authors included in this study has a considerable amount written about the sizeable role that servant leadership plays in garnering trust. Horsager writes, "One of the biggest reasons for trust is the perception that people are concerned, beyond themselves, for the good of the whole."<sup>84</sup> Both Covey and Cloud invoke the Golden Rule, but they apply it differently. Covey

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81. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 110.

82. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 111.

83. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 118. One would hope that no pastor thinks regularly about becoming a "great man" by the world's standards. Yet President Truman's quote rings of a virtue to which every pastor ought to aspire: dying to self to live for others. If pastors can be called "great men" in that regard, they will have served faithfully.

84. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 73.

speaks of the importance of recognizing the intrinsic value and worth of every human being,<sup>85</sup> while Cloud points out the value of empathy: “For empathy to affect trust, it must be real.... We have to truly care. But, we can really care and still fail to understand what someone else feels or needs from us. We can care deeply, yet not be able to truly see and understand someone else’s experience. Empathy comes from putting ourselves in someone else’s situation and identifying with their experience.”<sup>86</sup> Put simply, those who are trustworthy demonstrate selflessness. As Horsager says, “Those who act selflessly cause us to rely on them.”<sup>87</sup> Because this is true, he then offers this thought: “Consider if the success of your leadership, your organization, and your life might be about serving others and humanity in general.”<sup>88</sup>

### ***Motive***

As with every stage of growing trust, perception is pivotal. Being perceived as a compassionate, selfless, empathetic person is nowhere near as important as actually possessing those virtues. However, when it comes to being trusted, perception plays a key role. One way to clearly demonstrate trustworthy characteristics is for one’s motives to be abundantly clear. People want to see and understand the underlying purpose behind others’ actions. Cloud explains, “Trust increases when we know that someone’s motive is not just about themselves but about us or

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85. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 149.

86. Cloud, *Trust*, 54.

87. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 89.

88. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 93.

about a higher purpose that we value as well.”<sup>89</sup> He elaborates on the positive effects of clear, honorable motives: “When we feel an employer... church, or institution really does have our best interests at heart, we let down our guard.... When someone is motivated to have my best interests at heart, I don’t worry.”<sup>90</sup> Horsager gives his own version of the age-old exhortation to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes, encouraging, “No matter what your profession is, challenge yourself to start thinking like the customer, patient, client, congregation member, or student. Think of these people’s needs and challenges. Care about *them*. Give them a great experience. Make them feel valued. Not only is it fun and self-gratifying, but it will also help you gain the trust edge.”<sup>91</sup>

### ***Listening***

“At its core, trust is about relationships. It’s a way to measure how we feel about our interactions with the people and organizations with whom we deal.”<sup>92</sup> In order to foster positive relationships, demonstrate care for others, and selflessly prioritize their needs over one’s own, Horsager, Covey, and Cloud all encourage developing the skill of listening. Covey writes, “It’s vital to listen, to understand *first*. Otherwise you may be acting on assumptions that are totally incorrect—acting in ways that turn out to be embarrassing and counterproductive.”<sup>93</sup> Horsager calls listening “a fundamental skill of genuine success,” adding that it’s difficult to be trusted

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89. Cloud, *Trust*, 71.

90. Cloud, *Trust*, 64.

91. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 74.

92. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 169.

93. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 215.

without that fundamental skill.<sup>94</sup> Covey points out that listening has immense value for building trust because it helps the listener learn *how* to establish a rapport with the other person by understanding them.<sup>95</sup> Understanding, after all, is the ultimate goal. As Cloud explains: “Trust doesn’t start with convincing someone that you are right, or smart, or even trustworthy. It begins with helping someone to know that you understand them.”<sup>96</sup>

While listening is valuable in and of itself, it is also the tool that must be utilized to demonstrate genuine, selfless care and concern for others. Cloud has a considerable amount to say on the subject, again identifying the psychological factors at play:

When someone feels that you understand them, something magical happens. The brain begins to change, to move from its neutral or guarded state, or an “against you” state, to an open state. Their brain opens up to being open to you, and trust takes its first step. This is physical and chemical, as well as psychological and spiritual. Brain science teaches us that we are designed to begin to open ourselves to trusting someone when we feel they understand us, when we feel *mirrored* by them. A mirror reflects back to us who we are, and in the deepest communications between people, reflecting back to someone who they are says: “I see you. I hear you. I know who you are.” This opens their heart to feeling safe.<sup>97</sup>

A failure to listen will inevitably have devastating effects on trust-building efforts. Cloud states, “When we fail to understand someone at a deep level, we unknowingly communicate that we are only interested in ourselves.”<sup>98</sup> “But truly being understood in the way that leads to trust is when

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94. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 78.

95. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 218.

96. Cloud, *Trust*, 42.

97. Cloud, *Trust*, 43.

98. Cloud, *Trust*, 48.

someone acts on their understanding in ways that prove to the person, ‘Wow. You really do get me. You really do know what I need.’ By listening, one gains true knowledge of the other.”<sup>99</sup>

### ***A “Magnetic” Personality***

Selflessness flows out into every aspect of life. The more people remove focus from themselves and their own circumstances, the more they tend to carry positive and appreciative attitudes throughout their lives.<sup>100</sup> Horsager in particular speaks on the power that acts of appreciation toward others can have on gaining trust. As can be expected of selfless people, “Appreciative individuals focus on the person rather than the object or situation.”<sup>101</sup> That appreciation of others, he says, has an almost magnetic tendency which aids in relationship building: “Magnetic people are more trusted people. We tend to think this ability is innate or special. While certain people do have physical or hereditary traits that draw others in, most of what makes individuals appealing is a simple set of behaviors and attitudes.... One secret and irresistible quality of magnetic people is that they’re grateful.”<sup>102</sup>

It should not come as too much of a surprise that finding enjoyment in life can be hugely beneficial for building trust. The root cause of magnetic personalities may simply be that those who are grateful and appreciative are content in life, and people find value in spending time with those who light up a room rather than dim it. This is Horsager’s view. “People who learn to be

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99. Cloud, *Trust*, 47.

100. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 87.

101. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 87.

102. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 175.

thankful are more content and fulfilled. The single greatest commonality of happy people is an attitude of gratitude. And people find that attractive.”<sup>103</sup> The opposite attitude, not surprisingly, can have the opposite effect. While gossip may seem like an avenue to connect with others, it “breeds skepticism and erodes trust,”<sup>104</sup> as people are led to wonder if they’re talked about similarly when absent. Complaining, too, is detrimental to trust, as it creates an attitude of negativity and blame-shifting.<sup>105</sup>

While selflessness for many implies a burden, this does not have to be the case. Developing a mindset that finds joy in serving others—in learning what “makes them tick”—is selfless action that pays exponential dividends and makes one more trusted in the process. Horsager makes it simple: “If you really want to make new contacts, get to know them as people. Be kind. Have fun. Hold pleasant conversations. Learn to enjoy people for who they are. Ask questions and listen to what others say. Love people, let them talk, and you’ll be a magnet!”<sup>106</sup>

### Consistency

In many instances, the principles for building trust are best understood when one considers the ramifications of failing to uphold them. This is true in the case of the final, and perhaps most important element of trustworthiness: *consistency*. The opposite of a person whose words and actions are regularly consistent is one who contradicts himself, who claims to live by certain

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103. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 176.

104. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 176.

105. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 178.

106. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 177.



moral principles but does not act accordingly. Anyone who has witnessed hypocrisy knows that it is entirely antithetical to and destructive of integrity. Having integrity means that “one’s message and one’s life tell the same story. Hypocrisy kills the message.”<sup>107</sup> It undermines the consistency necessary for trust to exist.

Referencing his “Eight Pillars of Trust,” Horsager declares that consistency is the most important: “All of the pillars are critical, but if they are not practiced consistently, they crumble.”<sup>108</sup> Covey reinforces Horsager’s assessment, saying, “The key principle underlying [relationship trust] is *consistency*.”<sup>109</sup> Cloud adds, “What someone has done before is usually the best indicator of what will happen next time.”<sup>110</sup> What makes consistency so essential? Horsager provides this perspective: “With consistency comes trust. When we can count on people to deliver what they say, every single time, they become indispensable.... An instance of broken trust can create doubt, outright suspicion, or even a total loss of the relationship.”<sup>111</sup> While there are numerous approaches a person can take to establish trust with others, he will likely find himself fighting a losing battle if he does not live a life consistent with his values.

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107. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 100.

108. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 219.

109. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 34.

110. Cloud, *Trust*, 104.

111. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 220.

***“Trust Me!”***

In the book *The Trusted Advisor*, the authors raise a fundamental question regarding trust building: “How do you get somebody to trust you? It is clear that it is not done by saying, ‘Trust me!’ Nothing is more likely to get the listener to put up his or her defenses! The key point is that trust must be *earned* and *deserved*.”<sup>112</sup> So when, and how, does one capitalize on opportunities to earn and deserve trust? According to Horsager, it happens constantly: “You will never get one big chance to be trusted in your life; you will get thousands of small ones.”<sup>113</sup> “Trust is like oxygen in the air we breathe—something that we don’t think about all the time, but it plays a vital role in our lives. It’s inhaled and exhaled in every relationship we establish and is cleared or clouded by ways we choose to deal with others. Trust increases or decreases with every interaction.”<sup>114</sup>

Trust should never be assumed, nor should it be unconditional: “Trust is the highest value and greatest compliment, and it is reserved for those who earn it.... The strength of trust depends on the consistency of intent and integrity.”<sup>115</sup> Covey’s thoughts on the subject are consistent with the others’, as he connects the dots between integrity and consistency: “While integrity includes honesty, it’s much more. It’s integratedness. It’s walking your talk. It’s being congruent, inside and out. It’s having the courage to act in accordance with your values and beliefs. Interestingly, most massive violations of trust are violations of integrity.”<sup>116</sup>

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112. Robert W. Galford et al., *The Trustworthy Advisor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 17.

113. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 221.

114. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 222.

115. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 224.

116. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 56.

### *A Track Record of Trust*

Cloud explains trustworthy consistency in terms of a track record, on which every interaction has an impact.<sup>117</sup> While Cloud does not directly counter what other authors, particularly Covey, have said about the potential for building trust quickly, he does emphasize the fact that trust is not established overnight. “Trust is not simply given, it’s earned. People must show they are worthy of it, and that only happens through incremental performance over time. Time, not just performance, is a big factor here, and unfortunately, too many people are impatient.”<sup>118</sup> Horsager makes an almost identical point: “The track record of trust is built over time. There is no other way to lasting success.”<sup>119</sup>

The emphasis among the cited authors on every action and interaction having some bearing on trust can be an intimidating reality to grasp. After all, everyone has an occasional lapse in judgment that leads to an action inconsistent with their beliefs. None of Horsager, Covey, or Cloud intimate that perfection is required for trust to thrive. On the contrary, trust revolves around genuine human behavior, of which a critical component is the humility necessary to apologize for mistakes. Horsager writes, “When it comes to building trust, being able to say we’re sorry—and saying it sincerely—is an important skill. By contrast, insincere apologies, those made out of habit or indifference, are trust killers.”<sup>120</sup> Yet, to be trustworthy does not mean to over-apologize or constantly find a way to point out personal shortcomings. “Those

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117. Cloud, *Trust*, 113.

118. Cloud, *Trust*, 110.

119. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 231.

120. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 179.

who need to apologize only occasionally, and who do it sincerely, will be trusted.”<sup>121</sup> While an apology is brought about by inconsistency, the apology itself may demonstrate a consistently humble attitude that is incredibly trustworthy. Cloud recognizes that even the best track records will continue to evolve: “People grow and change, but the only way we know they can actually deliver on these things is for them to prove it. We need objective reasons to have hope and trust.”<sup>122</sup> A track record that demonstrates consistent positive progression is one that can be trusted.

### **Common Sense Behavior Builds Trust**

When reading extensively about developing winsome character traits in order to create trust, there will inevitably be moments when the reader thinks to himself, “*This is just common sense.*” Yet, as the old saying goes, “Common sense is not so common.”<sup>123</sup> If human beings were inherently adept at living out these principles, trust in the world would abound. If these skills came naturally to pastors, it seems unlikely that the statistics regarding public trust in the church would appear so dire. When it comes to building trust, the world could use a return to the basics. For pastors to give active consideration to seemingly commonsense principles such as these may seem excessive amid the countless other disciplines that pull him this way and that. Yet it’s because they truly are common sense that a pastor ought to take a moment to consider these principles, and to remember the basic behaviors that are proven to enhance and deepen

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121. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 180.

122. Cloud, *Trust*, 107.

123. Quote attributed to Voltaire, among others.

relationships. The pastor's competence from his seminary training and his continued studies, his dedication—working with all his heart, as one working for the Lord (Col 3:23)—combined with his consistent Christian character and Spirit-given selflessness demonstrate that he has every tool he needs to be seen as a trustworthy individual. As Pat Springle writes in his book *Trusting: Learning Who and How to Trust Again*, “Our growing compassion is not lost on others. They can sense a new strength, coupled with gentleness and quickness to forgive. They learn to see us as approachable because we don't condemn them or try to fix them. And they find us more dependable because we can share with them the wisdom we are learning. We are becoming more worthy of trust.”<sup>124</sup> A pastor will never be trusted in the eyes of all, but being worthy of trust remains an admirable goal.

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124. Springle, *Trusting*, 220.

## METHODOLOGY

A significant portion of the research for this study was conducted via interview. Three interviews were conducted with pastors, and two with WELS lay members with leadership expertise. All interviews took place via phone call or Zoom video conference. The interviews followed a similar structure of questions (included in Appendix 2), but each interview was allowed to run a unique course that presented interviewees with opportunities to speak extensively on their personal areas of interest. All interviewees gave their written consent for their names and quotations to be included in this thesis. This interview research was gathered primarily in an attempt to balance the trust principles from the studied literature with real-world experiences of WELS leaders. The goal of the interview process was to gauge the degree to which the principles espoused by the studied authors aligned with the opinions of WELS pastors and leaders as they shared their own perspectives on the most effective ways to build trust.

## APPLYING TRUST-BUILDING PRINCIPLES TO PASTORAL MINISTRY

The arguments that trust can be intentionally built are numerous. This skill is so crucial to a pastor because, in the eyes of many, he has lost trust. As David Horsager says, “The biggest deceiver is the one who appears trustworthy when in fact he is not.”<sup>125</sup> To many non-Christians, that’s exactly what a pastor is: a figure who is untrustworthy because the church has abused the trust of so many. Glenn Packiam shares a startling statistic in a 2022 edition of *Christianity Today*: “Less than a third of Christians said they ‘definitely’ consider a pastor a ‘trustworthy source of wisdom. As you might expect, a mere 4 percent of non-Christians think of pastors in this way.’”<sup>126</sup> In the words of LCMS pastor Harold Senkbeil, “To many people [pastors are] irrelevant vestiges left over from a simpler, more religious era.”<sup>127</sup> In an increasingly areligious culture, people fail to see clearly what a pastor’s purpose is in society, and that lack of clarity leads to an absence of trust. It’s one thing to understand some basic tried-and-true advice for becoming more trusted. But for a pastor hoping to win the trust of others as the public representative of his church, how can these principles be applied? That’s certainly a question that each individual pastor must decide for himself, but it may also prove helpful to consider the perspectives of brother pastors and hear of their experiences in regard to gaining trust.

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125. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 28.

126. Glenn Packiam, “As Pastoral Credibility Erodes, How Can We Respond?,” *Christianity Today*, Spring 2022, 34.

127. Harold Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor’s Heart* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2019), 15.

### Understanding Trust as a Pastor

The introduction of this study pointed out statistical evidence that suggests pastors are not highly trusted members of their communities in the present day. The pastors interviewed seemed to concur with the conclusion of the statistics, but each provided an interesting caveat. Mike Novotny, pastor at The CORE in Appleton, WI, said the reactions he receives toward being a pastor include “some of everything, but probably less positive than more positive.”<sup>128</sup> Dave Koelpin, pastor at Foundation Lutheran Church in Folsom, CA, noted a pastor entering a conversation can have a similar effect to the presence of a police officer, as people suddenly become hyper-aware of their words and actions.<sup>129</sup> Pastor Lucas Bitter of Intown Lutheran in Atlanta, GA, admitted that his profession can certainly change the course of a conversation, but he also expressed surprise at the wide range of reactions, especially in the largely secular community in which he serves: “I’ve kind of been surprised at just how interested people are, and in that environment that is definitely less Christian, it’s a more positive response.... It’s just open-minded: ‘Oh, Confessional Lutheran? Cool! I mean, don’t tell me that *I* have to be that, but, cool.’”<sup>130</sup> Within this range of outcomes lie so many various avenues in which a pastor looking to build relationships can direct the conversation. Choosing the direction that is most likely to produce a fruitful outcome is no easy task.

In a conversation about his profession, the first and most immediate course of action a pastor takes is deciding how to guide the discussion forward. Does he further address the “elephant in the room” that brought about a lull in the dialogue? Does he immediately make it

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128. Mike Novotny, interview by author. Zoom conference, December 5, 2023.

129. Dave Koelpin, interview by author. Phone call, November 29, 2023.

130. Lucas Bitter, interview by author. Phone call, December 5, 2023.



his top priority to attempt to dispel others' misinformed preconceptions about him? According to Novotny, it can be beneficial to resist the urge to immediately escape the uncomfortable: "I just own the awkwardness and see where it takes me," he says, even making an occasional joke about the interesting reactions that his occupation can garner.<sup>131</sup> Koelpin suggests seeking out an opportunity to present his profession on his terms: "I've just learned to kind of embrace it and to even actually be a little bit more up-front. I don't like waiting for it to come up; a lot of times I'll bring it up and then let them see that I'm a normal person."<sup>132</sup>

It seems that an inevitable result of pastoral ministry is gradually becoming more comfortable with the uncomfortable. This is certainly a skill that affects more than outreach efforts, as difficult conversations are a component of multiple facets of ministry. But to a pastor, an awkward moment in a conversation—one that might look like a trainwreck to some—is an opportunity. If the interaction can survive the initial uneasiness, it can transition into something deeper than superficial small talk. Yet there is an art to every step in this process, as the pastor looks to capitalize on opportunities to shift the conversation away from himself and toward the other person and their relationship with Jesus. While that is the true "elephant in the room" that people would so often prefer to avoid, it's also the type of conversation that defines a pastor's work. To some, guiding conversations in a beneficial direction is entirely instinctual, and they can naturally speak about their profession in an engaging manner. But for many pastors, opportunities to build positive connections can be missed when everything rests upon how well they are able to respond in the moment. As pastors seek to build trust, create relationships, and

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131. M. Novotny interview.

132. D. Koelpin interview.

open doors to share the gospel, the stakes are simply too high to disregard knowledge that can make or break a trust-building opportunity.

### **Building Trust as a Pastor**

Interestingly, in the interviews conducted for this study revolving around trust building, all three pastors focused almost exclusively on concepts related to making connections with others. Their responses echo much of the advice from the studied literature, especially under the topics designated as *Character*, *Selflessness*, and *Consistency*. Pastors Novotny, Koelpin, and Bitter indicated through their responses that ministry truly is all about people. They exemplified servant leadership in the hope of fostering relationships for the sake of the gospel. Their responses will be organized according to the three aforementioned headings for the sake of a logical progression. However, it must be noted that no collection of quotes can communicate the pastoral heart for service that exuded from each interview, demonstrating that these pastors are worthy of the trust they seek.

### **The Trusted Pastor's Character**

*Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it (Titus 1:7–9).*

Mike Heil is a retired US Army Lieutenant Colonel with a PhD in organizational leadership. He joined a WELS church in recent years, and when asked what impressed him in his initial visit to his church, Heil responded, “First and foremost was the pastor.”<sup>133</sup> There are countless aspects of a church that can impact a first-time guest’s experience, but the character of the pastor himself, for better or worse, plays a vital role. Even so, a pastor on a Sunday morning has the time and opportunity to create little more than a first impression. The interactions that follow are pivotal as the pastor looks to faithfully represent the gospel ministry to which he has been called. “We glorify God with our character and our compassion.”<sup>134</sup> So says Kurt Nitz, a highly successful businessman whose work has focused on shaping culture for corporations around the globe. He is also one of the developers of the WELS program Everyone Outreach. The program focuses on equipping congregations to connect with their communities, and its existence is a testimony that church leaders have recognized face-to-face communication to be the most effective way for outreach to take place.

### ***The Trusted Pastor Among the People***

It’s for a similar reason, then, that Pastor Koelpin puts a heavy emphasis upon a pastor being a man of the people. In his various ministry settings—from rural Nebraska to suburban Denver to quaint and wholesome Folsom, CA—he has looked to connect with his next-door neighbors as a first step in reaching out to his community. Koelpin readily admits that this can be a complicated

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133. Mike Heil, interview by author. Phone call, November 30, 2023.

134. Kurt Nitz, interview by author. Zoom conference, November 29, 2023.

task: “The key for a pastor, in my opinion, is learning how to rub shoulders with unbelievers like Jesus did, and do it in a way that doesn’t condone sin.”<sup>135</sup>

As a pastor demonstrates his willingness to spend time with people around him in his life, people recognize that he is a person to whom they can relate, someone who is not so different from them after all. Avoiding occasions to mingle with people—even if not every behavior that takes place at the gathering would be suitable for a church fellowship hall—can represent a wasted opportunity to form relationships. Koelpin encourages pastors to always consider, “Who’s influencing who in this situation?” and offers a valuable perspective regarding how to decide which events to attend: “It’s a good thing to always embrace the tension.”<sup>136</sup> Christians are called to live a life that is distinct from the ways of the world, while remaining connected with the unbelieving world for the purpose of sharing the gospel with those who unwittingly walk in the darkness of unbelief. “If there’s no longer a tension involved in your mingling with people that don’t know Jesus,” Koelpin says, “it’s a dangerous place.”<sup>137</sup>

Ultimately, the goal of these interactions is for the pastor to develop a rapport with people outside the church, leading them into a comfortable relationship with a spiritual leader. Koelpin encourages keeping that final goal in mind: “I don’t want to ever not be thinking about how they view me, not in an arrogant or egotistical way, but because I am an ambassador for Jesus.”<sup>138</sup> As that ambassador, the pastor hopes that people walk away from their exchanges with him holding a positive perception, having seen the love of Christ shine through the Christian. Koelpin hopes

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135. D. Koelpin interview.

136. D. Koelpin interview.

137. D. Koelpin interview.

138. D. Koelpin interview.

that such individuals understand two facts about the pastor with utmost clarity: “Do they know I love them? Do they know that I care more about Jesus than anything else?”<sup>139</sup> This approach is a biblical one, as the qualifications for ministry in 1 Timothy 3 include having a good reputation with outsiders (1 Tim 3:7). Constantly making sure he has the appropriate balance in his relationships with unchurched acquaintances can seem like an intimidating task, but Koelpin sees it as a worthy challenge on par with the rest of Christian life: “It is exhausting, and that’s the Christian cross. I’ve got to struggle every day, I’m evaluating my actions, not because I’m afraid I’m not going to go to heaven, but because I love Jesus so much, I want to be a good ambassador for him.”<sup>140</sup>

### *The Trusted Pastor’s Transparency*

With public interaction comes a necessity for the pastor to present himself to outsiders as he truly is. Pastor Bitter recites advice that was once given him by an older pastor: “God doesn’t want you to go be some person that you’re not so that you can be a pastor. God wants you to be the kind of pastor that’s you.”<sup>141</sup> This requires a level of transparency that may be uncomfortable to some, but, as explained by Horsager and Covey, can be incredibly valuable in earning trust in the eyes of others. Pastor Novotny calls personal transparency “by far the biggest, and the most complicated and dangerous” avenue for a pastor to build trust.<sup>142</sup> Opening up to others allows for

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139. D. Koelpin interview.

140. D. Koelpin interview.

141. L. Bitter interview.

142. M. Novotny interview.

connections to form on deeper levels, as people identify with shared human experiences. At appropriate moments, this may even include a pastor confessing his own faults. Novotny shares, “To hate sin but be super candid about your own sin, I know of nothing like it to build trust. It’s so disarming, it’s so shocking to people. It’s not what non-Christians expect. It’s what most Christians wish they could do. I’ve done so much ministry once I’ve started a conversation with a palm-sweating confession; that’s when I actually get to be a pastor.”<sup>143</sup>

The danger that Novotny mentions, of course, is that an over-sharing of personal faults can diminish people’s view of the pastoral ministry. For this reason, transparency requires an extreme degree of wisdom and tact. However, Novotny considers the reward to far outweigh the risk. After all, what is a pastor’s highest priority: his own reputation, or walking hand-in-hand with fellow sinners and leading them to the cross of Jesus? A pastor could not be faulted for shying away from transparency in an attempt to protect his own reputation as he represents his Savior. Yet it is important to recognize that an honest admission of personal failure in an appropriate setting may not lead directly to a destruction of trust, but might instead help foster it. Novotny raves about transparency, “People didn’t know they could trust me with something that vulnerable until I started the conversation.... I get it. I know what it’s like to be Paul in Romans 7,<sup>144</sup> and that has just opened countless doors for me to be a pastor.”<sup>145</sup>

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143. M. Novotny interview.

144. In Romans 7:15, Paul writes, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.”

145. M. Novotny interview.

### The Trusted Pastor's Selflessness

*“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43–45).*

As pastors live out their vocations, they seek to emulate the servant mentality of Jesus. Pastors live to serve others in service of the Savior. Paul’s words in Philippians 2 are especially relevant to the discussion of a pastor’s selflessness as a trustworthy behavior: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves” (Phil 2:3). While no one is able to carry out that godly aspiration perfectly, valuing others above oneself is an essential quality of a pastor who is trusted.

### ***The Trusted Pastor Listens***

Just as listening was such an essential quality laid out by the authors in the literature review, those interviewed in this study place a high degree of emphasis on the importance of listening to others to build trust. Kurt Nitz recounts a story of a pastor who caught a staunch atheist by surprise when, instead of launching into a debate, was willing to listen to the man’s perspectives.<sup>146</sup> In the foreword to the 2018 book *Quick to Listen*, Professor Mark Paustian gives several compelling reasons that pastors—and all Christians—would be wise to seek to understand before seeking to be understood. Paustian writes, “Jesus listened to people, so certainly there must remain some very good reasons for us, the not-so-omniscient, to want to hear

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146. K. Nitz interview.

people.”<sup>147</sup> Paustian praises the authors of *Quick to Listen*, all pastors themselves, for their openness, a level of vulnerability that other pastors would do well to emulate. He says their openness is “not to error, God forbid—but an openness to people, being profoundly interested in how they have come to think and live as they do.”<sup>148</sup> A genuine interest in and appreciation of others will naturally lead a pastor to ask questions—thoughtful, concerned questions—that both open others up in a manner that can easily lead to spiritual discussions and solidify the pastor as a worthy recipient of their trust.

Pastor Novotny shared a perspective on listening that many likely overlook, as it is a type of listening demonstrated by speaking. Novotny mentioned how he seeks to fairly represent the “other side” in his preaching, showing to those who hear his sermons that he has listened to the most common objections to the Christian faith and, as their pastor, is concerned about addressing those objections equitably.<sup>149</sup> “When I picture someone on the opposite side sitting in the front row, I [look to] research and represent them well.”<sup>150</sup>

Pastor Bitter also offers a notable take on listening, sharing that he thinks of conversations revolving around apologetics as an opportunity to listen to others and build trust. He even stated, “My definition for what [apologetics] is would be building trust.”<sup>151</sup> Bitter explains that he looks to demonstrate to those skeptical of Christianity that he genuinely cares for them and is fascinated by their thoughts and wants to hear about their objections to the faith. In

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147. Mark Paustian, foreword to *Quick to Listen: Understanding Viewpoints that Challenge Your Faith*, by Samuel Degner et al. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2018), xii.

148. Paustian, foreword, x.

149. M. Novotny interview.

150. M. Novotny interview.

151. L. Bitter interview.



discussions such as these, he looks to give the opposing viewpoints extensive consideration before looking to respond. “I’m totally willing to sit... in his complete skepticism and look at it with him, and then he’s willing... to think of it through faith—what if it was true?”<sup>152</sup> Mike Heil makes a similar point about connecting with those who look at the world from a different perspective: “I try to be myself as much as I can but understand where they’re coming from; there’s still bridges that can be built. You still have to be who you are—you’re not going to change for them—but I’d ask them more questions, find out who they are, and build bridges.”<sup>153</sup>

### *The Trusted Pastor’s Motives*

A major hurdle for some who identify as non-religious is understanding the motive of a pastor. One could imagine how a staunch belief that there is no God and no afterlife could lead to the opinion that the church is, at best, a distraction from what truly matters and, at worst, a crooked money-making scheme. It’s for this reason that a church and a pastor having a benevolent presence in a community can help shift perceptions about their motives. Acts of civic righteousness can become an opportunity to point unbelievers to the source of true righteousness. Jesus encourages believers, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16). Kurt Nitz points out that non-Christians need to believe that a church is a force for the greater good before they’ll attend it for the right reasons. A pastor and his congregation can demonstrate that their church is a trustworthy place to

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152. L. Bitter interview.

153. M. Heil interview.

be “by demonstrating their community connection and doing some of the other things that lead people to say, ‘You're not like those other guys that aren't trustworthy.’”<sup>154</sup>

Pastor Novotny offers a practical perspective on forging community connections: “If my assumption is that pastors are bad people and religion is a bad thing, and here this pastor is coming to freely mentor [kids] and he's buying me coffee and he remembers my name—and no one remembers my name!—simple acts of kindness” can make a big difference in building trust.<sup>155</sup> Pastor Bitter speaks of the value of being a community member “without strings attached,” adding, “One of our ministry goals and my personal goals is just to put myself in as many different social circles as possible.”<sup>156</sup> Novotny agrees, sharing some tongue-in-cheek advice regarding how pastors choose to interact with their communities:

Avoid, at all costs, all inherently Christian gatherings besides church and Bible study. Don't join a church basketball league; go play basketball with non-Christian people. Don't start a church running club; just go run at your local running club! We only get so many hours in the day to invest our light and our faith in other people... so force yourself outside that bubble and meet some people in community.<sup>157</sup>

Pastor Koelpin offers a reminder to keep the pastor's true motive in mind. “You're not there to change their behavior; you're there to just be a loving person that cares about them and get an opportunity to love them the way God loves them, and then that's when the trust builds is when they feel like they can be safe around you.”<sup>158</sup> He shares the story of an acquaintance who, in their first interaction, told Pastor Koelpin that he had no intention of ever attending church.

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154. K. Nitz interview.

155. M. Novotny interview.

156. L. Bitter interview.

157. M. Novotny interview.

158. D. Koelpin interview.

Then, months down the road and after the two had become friends, he asked Koelpin why he had never invited him to worship. Koelpin responded, “Because I wanted to be your friend first. Because I wanted you to know that even if you never come to church, I’m still going to be your friend.”<sup>159</sup> As evidenced by the man’s question, Pastor Koelpin’s tactic seemingly paid off. He added, “I think there was some trust won there because he didn't view my friendship with him as something that had an agenda.”<sup>160</sup>

### The Trusted Pastor’s Consistency

*“Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim 4:16).*

God’s Word from 1 Timothy is a reminder of the importance of consistency. The life of faith is a long race that requires endurance; to treat faith as something that will take care of itself is to dangerously underestimate the powers that want to destroy it. If the devil’s temptations can lead a pastor into living a hypocritical life and holding to inconsistent doctrine, he’s likely to become a stumbling block to many others as well. Likewise, a pastor who treats his title as one that comes and goes based on the day of the week is vulnerable to living a life contradictory to his calling. A pastor who is the same person at all times, regardless of circumstances, proves himself worthy of trust.

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159. D. Koelpin interview.

160. D. Koelpin interview.

### *The Trusted Pastor's Patience*

Both Pastor Bitter and Pastor Koelpin indicate that a key component in forming relationships as a pastor is the opportunity for those relationships to develop gradually. Trust is not won overnight. When asked how they might respond to someone who demonstrates a lack of trust in pastors, Koelpin was quick to ask, “How much time am I going to have with these people?”<sup>161</sup> Bitter likewise wondered, “Is this a person that I'm meeting one time at their door while canvassing the neighborhood, or is this a person that I see regularly and I'm going to see them again? My goal is to have as many of my conversations as possible be the latter.”<sup>162</sup> Their point is one that the cited authors make repeatedly, and Bitter nearly echoes Horsager when he says, “Trust is built from a lot of interactions in various settings that are all consistent across the board rather than just having one amazing talk.”<sup>163</sup>

Pastor Novotny encourages pastors to identify opportunities to create consistent interactions, such as regularly going to the same gas station or getting their hair cut at the same barber shop.<sup>164</sup> Bitter reinforces Novotny's point, saying, “The goal is to put yourself in situations where you'll see the same people repeatedly until trust is built just as a fellow human being, and you'll eventually get to the church stuff with some of them.”<sup>165</sup> If those interviewed made one resounding point about the practice of building trust, especially in situations where it is unlikely, it is to practice patience and be committed to forging that relationship over a lengthy period of

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161. D. Koelpin interview.

162. L. Bitter interview.

163. L. Bitter interview.

164. M. Novotny interview.

165. L. Bitter interview.

time. And while this is true of all types of relationships, Pastor Bitter speculates that Christians have additional reason to practice patience in pursuing trust. “As Christianity becomes less of a cultural expectation, as churchgoing becomes less of a cultural expectation, it's really going to take more time, and so, if we're going to win people's trust, it's just our whole life and how we are, and it's going to take time.”<sup>166</sup>

### *The Trusted Pastor Is a Normal Guy*

This final point relating to consistency may seem somewhat subjective. It is true that “normal” is in the eye of the beholder. To suggest that any of the interviewees are in favor of a pastor living indistinguishably from the rest of the world would be a gross mischaracterization. In that sense, no pastor can be “normal,” as it would be the most inconsistent action he could possibly take, a direct contradiction of Jesus’ directive for Christians to be salt and light (Matt 5:13–16). Rather, when they speak of the importance of being normal, they mean that a pastor has relatable interests and life experiences with the average person. He can carry on a conversation, exercise proper manners, and demonstrate appropriate emotion in a way that causes other people to recognize that this pastor isn’t so different from them after all. And perhaps most importantly, for a pastor to be considered normal, he must display his genuine personality and be comfortable in his own skin.

Pastor Bitter explains what it means to be a normal pastor in a way that is conducive to building trust:

I think that this is hugely important: to just be normal and not be weird and awkward. I mean, everyone's weird and awkward in our own normal ways; no one's a perfectly

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166. L. Bitter interview.

smooth person. But I think that's probably one of the most important outreach skills to cultivate is just trying to be normal and be comfortable and to not have this huge disparity between how you are in the conversation and how you are at your church—just being approachable and in tune with other people in your general age and area and being able to relate to them, whether or not they share your faith.<sup>167</sup>

Pastor Koelpin speaks in similar terms and adds an additional perspective as to why people may appreciate a normal pastor: “I think people generally like being around somebody that's normal but doesn't like to indulge in all the bad language and is generally pretty responsible with their behavior, because it can be contagious.”<sup>168</sup> As abnormal of advice as it may seem, being a normal pastor has undeniable value. What being normal truly comes down to is confidence in oneself and one's message. Who has more reason to be confident than a pastor, who knows who he is as a child of God through faith, and whose message is superior to all others? Pastors who remain humble but exude faith-based confidence set themselves up to be trusted.

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167. L. Bitter interview.

168. D. Koelpin interview.

## CONCLUSION

Whenever a pastor thinks he has discovered the next great innovation for ministry, the biblical reminder that there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl 1:9) is an important one. But just because nothing is new from God's perspective does not preclude human beings from helping one another approach life's basic truths from innovative angles. Horsager, Covey, and Cloud suggest various principles and techniques for building trust; they label those principles and surround them with buzzwords that make them sound and appear cutting-edge. However, a good portion of these trust-creating behaviors will sound quite familiar to the Lutheran pastor, as they are simply a repackaging of biblical virtues.<sup>169</sup> When pastors hear secular advice that echoes what they've heard from the Bible their entire lives, it can be tempting to ignore it for that very reason, with an eye roll and an announcement, "Nothing new here!" Aside from the fact that this is a constricting and narrow-minded framework for listening to the advice of others, the goal of this study is not simply to hear an abundance of perspectives on high-character behavior. Rather, for the benefit of pastors and gospel ministry, this study has sought to aid in attaining a broader understanding of how these clearly beneficial courses of action can be intentionally utilized by pastors to increase trust. As Mike Heil succinctly stated, "You can't really be a good leader if

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169. This is by no means a bad thing. All three authors reference the Bible in their books, and Horsager and Cloud openly acknowledge their Christian faith. Identifying the biblical roots of their advice is not to accuse them of falsely presenting information, but to commend them for sharing divinely inspired wisdom in a manner that increases the likelihood of all audiences accepting it.

people don't trust you. It's really about your values and beliefs; the strengths and convictions that you show and the actions that you take."<sup>170</sup>

The world's trust crisis does not need much proving. Statistics and everyday experiences alike demonstrate a world severely lacking the trusting relationships that enable efficient societies and healthy interpersonal interaction. The classic illustration of an untrustworthy profession—the used car salesman—has seemingly lost some of its meaning, as countless people now view nearly everyone they meet with a similar guarded skepticism. It is hardly surprising that where trust in God has been done away with, trust in one another follows suit.

People need Jesus, and they have no idea. Many are proud to live in an era in which antiquated religion has finally fallen by the wayside. The gaping holes in their lives and their unquenchable desire for meaning, belonging, and acceptance are, to them, completely unrelated to their disinterest in Christianity. Statistical trends—and, more importantly, divine predictions—indicate that as time marches on toward Judgment Day, pastors will continue to encounter more and more souls that are painfully ignorant of their need for a Savior, convinced that they have no interest in organized religion. The task is a challenging one, but it is given by a loving God, who promises that the miracle of converting stone hearts into believing ones is entirely his responsibility. But although his power is incomprehensible, he has chosen feeble human messengers as the vessels for sharing his gospel. The good news of Jesus has always been shared relationally, and relationships always have their roots in trust.

Only God is able to change hearts in a way that impacts eternity, but human beings are occasionally able to change one another's minds—*occasionally*. A pastor will never debate his way into a better standing with a religious skeptic. Such a change of opinion toward a pastor and

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170. M. Heil interview.



his occupation can take place only when the pastor’s words and actions constantly communicate: *I hear you; I care about you; I have no hidden agenda; I practice what I preach; I can be trusted.* If gaining trust truly can be a powerful tool to open doors for evangelism, what pastor wouldn’t be enthusiastic to put that tool to use? The possibility for building trust breathes life into mundane activities, as each interaction with others represents an opportunity. The little things become a big deal. Keeping appointments, staying organized, being transparent, developing a growth mindset—all of it matters! Every second of pastoral ministry always *has* mattered, as service to a gracious God. If the recognition of trust-building opportunities serves only as a regular reminder to a pastor of the immense privilege of his calling, it has already proven its worth.

Amid the many and varied approaches to gaining trust and the numerous incentives for utilizing them, ultimately a pastor’s aspiration to be trusted is rooted in his intense desire for others to come to know their Lord. The Christian faith is entirely predicated on trust and the fact that God is worthy of it. Human beings will constantly disappoint one another. Even the most trustworthy individuals will have to rebuild trust when it is broken; not so with God. Pat Springle writes, “Trust is central to our relationship with God, but Scripture makes no attempt to define it.”<sup>171</sup> True as this may be, the Christian can quickly find himself lost in thought as he marvels at the profound Scriptural truths about the trustworthiness of God: “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation” (Ps 13:5). “He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new! Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true’” (Rev 21:5). “Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD himself, is the Rock eternal” (Is 26:4). “LORD Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you”

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171. Springle, *Trusting*, 13.

(Ps 84:12). “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation” (Isa 12:2). Because God himself is the Christian’s salvation—the embodiment of selfless sacrifice, offered for those who had only proven untrustworthy—the Christian falls in awe before the cross of Jesus, in whom alone he fully trusts.

Springle eloquently articulates the Christian perspective on trust:

The more we understand the trustworthiness of God, the more secure and worthy of trust we ourselves become. Our character is changed. The powerful become meek, and the helpless grow in strength. The smart learn to listen, and the ignorant become wise. Experiencing more of God's grace opens the door to healthy relationships: we can love others as God loves us (1 Jn 1:10-11); we can accept others in the same way that he accepts us (Rom 15:7); and we can forgive others because we are overwhelmed with the fact that God has forgiven us (Eph 4:32). Learning how to express these elements of divine grace may be slow, but trustworthiness is a strength that is forged over time.<sup>172</sup>

A fitting analogy for a pastor’s efforts to gain trust is found in the book of Exodus: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you’” (Exod 19:9). While the modern pastor has no such divine visitation to testify to his trustworthiness, he is trusted for the very same reason that the Israelites trusted Moses: the pastor speaks to his people the very words of God. He diagnoses the sin that infects their lives, and never fails to treat their every wound with the sweet reassurance of God’s unchangeable grace in Christ. All the while, the pastor walks with his people through the challenges and joys that accompany their time of grace, and he speaks to them a final word of divine comfort before they are received into the arms of their Savior. This is the work of a pastor; it is the very work of God. It is the most trustworthy calling

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172. Springle, *Trusting*, 222.

to which a man can aspire. It is all a pastor can do to seek to personally emanate the trustworthiness that is inherent to his calling.

## APPENDIX 1: HORSAGER INTEGRITY STORY

When I was about ten years old, my dad and I were out in the bean fields checking the irrigators on our crop farm in northern Minnesota. We grew semitruck loads of dark red kidney beans for chili and other foods. On our way from one field to another, my dad swerved the pickup truck over because he saw some trash in the middle of the public dirt road. I knew that I was supposed to “help keep the land clean,” so I opened my door and reached down to get the trash. It was a *Playboy* magazine. My dad quickly kicked it under the seat of the pickup truck.

We drove silently from field to field and from irrigator to irrigator. I kept thinking about how Dad said that kind of magazine was not the right way to treat women or to have a pure mind, not to mention how it could hurt your wife and marriage. Many times I heard him encourage our tough hired men to grow stronger marriages. I knew that he believed pornography was both damaging and wrong. Yet my dad said nothing about the trash we had found.

About mid-morning we came into the home area and shop. My dad went to the shop and started working on a tractor. I went into the house to help my mother. A little while later, my mom asked me to get my dad for something. For some reason, I stopped at the small garage door window that looked out toward the shop. I was at least fifty yards from my dad, but I could still see him well. I stood still and watched my dad for a few minutes before going out. There is no way he could see or hear me. And there was no reason he would think I, or anyone, was watching at that moment.

I watched him pull himself out from under the tractor. He opened the door to the blue Chevy pickup truck, reached under the seat, and grabbed the magazine. Then, without glancing down for a single second, he walked with his arm outstretched straight over to our shop stove, where he threw the magazine into the fire.

Dad's integrity was challenged that day, but he proved, when nobody was looking, that his character was unshakable. How many fathers, after telling their kids to stay away from such material, would have been tempted to have a quick peek inside? It might seem like a little thing, throwing some trash into the fire, but to me, it was an enormous statement about Dad's character. Most important, it was proof that he could be trusted.<sup>173</sup>

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173. Horsager, *The Trust Edge*, 104–5.

## APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Where are you currently serving, and what is unique about your ministry setting? (If applicable)

When you tell people you're a pastor/Christian, do you feel that increases or decreases their level of trust in you?

Has that been any different at other places you've served/lived?

If you meet someone and they're put off by the fact that you're a pastor/Christian, how do you tend to respond?

Do you have any specific strategies, techniques, or phrases that you look to use to diffuse a situation with someone who is hostile to your profession or religion?

In your ministry, have you ever thought about intentionally looking to build trust among others, or is that more of an implicit thought that goes along with everything else a pastor/Christian is called to do?

Do you have any thoughts on what helps make a pastor a trusted member of the community?

“In the twenty-first century, trust has become the world's most precious resource.” What do you think of Horsager's assessment?

Personally, I view consistency as absolutely crucial for a pastor to be trusted. People despise hypocrisy. If their pastor is a different person on Sundays than he is in his private life—if he doesn't practice what he preaches—people won't find out instantly, but gradually the lack of consistency will show through. Do you have any further thoughts on that topic?

Do you draw a distinction between pastor as minister of the gospel (outreach-minded) and pastor as church organizer/leader? If so, does that mean we look to build trust differently in the community than we do with our members?

Any other thoughts you'd like to share about being a trusted leader in the church?

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