

Christ Has Instituted the Public Ministry To Bless the Church

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AC	Augsburg Confession
Ap	Apology of the Augsburg Confession
<i>CHIQ</i>	<i>Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly</i>
CICR	Commission on Inter-Church Relations of WELS
<i>CJ</i>	<i>Concordia Journal</i>
CTCR	Commission on Theology and Church Relations of LCMS
<i>CTM</i>	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
<i>CTQ</i>	<i>Concordia Theological Quarterly</i>
<i>CurTM</i>	<i>Currents in Theology and Mission</i>
ELS	Evangelical Lutheran Synod
FC	Formula of Concord
Jacobs	<i>The Book of Concord</i> . Edited by Henry E. Jacobs. Philadelphia: United Lutheran Press, 1908.
Kolb-Wengert	<i>The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church</i> . Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000.
LCMS	Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
<i>LQ</i>	<i>Lutheran Quarterly</i>
<i>LSQ</i>	<i>Lutheran Synod Quarterly</i>
<i>LW</i>	<i>Luther's Works</i> . American Edition. St. Louis: Concordia, and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–
McCain	<i>Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions</i> . Edited by Paul T. McCain. St. Louis: Concordia, 2005.
<i>NL</i>	<i>Northwestern Lutheran</i>
Tappert	<i>The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church</i> . Translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959.
<i>TQ</i>	<i>Theologische Quartalschrift</i>
Tr	Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope
<i>Triglot</i>	<i>Concordia Triglotta: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church</i> . St. Louis: Concordia, 1921.
WELS	Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
<i>WHIJ</i>	<i>WELS Historical Institute Journal</i>
<i>WLQ</i>	<i>Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly</i>

INTRODUCTION

I still remember something that was in my mind when I concluded my stint on the Commission on Inter-Church Relations (CICR) in 2015. I thought: “Ah! Now I can finally put the doctrine of the ministry to rest.”

My twenty-three years on the CICR were a non-stop journey through the labyrinth of Lutheran discussions on the ministry. In the 1990s, these discussions involved the *Evangelisch-Lutherische Freikirche* (ELFK) in Germany, and then they continued with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) in various iterations. I was in the room in 1996 when the Lutheran Confessional Synod (LCS) broke fellowship with ELS and WELS because of the doctrine of the ministry.

As soon as I left the CICR, however, I found myself in annual meetings with leaders of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), and guess what. We wind up talking about the ministry at most every meeting.¹ And then, I was asked to write this symposium paper. Maybe now I can put the doctrine to rest after this!

But in reality, I have become convinced that this doctrine will never be put to rest in the Lutheran church until Judgment Day. The many of you who belong to a younger generation—I predict—will not be exempt from ministry discussions, with the doctrine ironed out by previous generations.

The whole topic has a fascinating level of complication and nuance. There is a mountain of literature that could be read—and if you think you have adequately covered the literature in the United States, then you could try the library of materials in German.² Though I have been reading ministry materials with a special interest for fifty years, I still feel that I have only scratched the surface.³

Then there are the unique linguistic challenges that face the serious Lutheran theologian, involving a variety of languages. Besides the Greek of the New Testament, there is the German and Latin of our Lutheran forefathers. With those languages it is has been rightly noted: “Both the German and Latin words for ‘ministry’ (*Amt*, *officium*) are notorious for ambiguity. Either

1. Meetings involving ELS, LCMS, and WELS leaders have been held in November or December every year since 2012. To date, twelve in-person meetings have been held, with an online meeting in 2020 due to COVID.

2. There is a wide context to the Lutheran discussion of the ministry not touched on in this paper, involving centuries of debate with an extra degree of fervor in Germany in the 1800s.

3. I recently rediscovered my senior dogmatics paper written for Dr. Siegbert Becker in March 1982, which was “An Introduction to Walther’s ‘Trilogy’ on the Church.”

they can mean the office or position that is given the responsibility of performing certain functions, or they can mean the functions themselves.”⁴

So, the expectations for this paper are clear. The paper will not be the last word on the public ministry. It will only be the best that I can offer on the basis of what God has granted to me in terms of understanding and experience—just one participant in one corner of Christ’s church. And, the paper will focus heavily on the respective positions of WELS and LCMS, since WELS/LCMS dialogue colors much ministry discussion in our circles, and it is what I am most familiar with.⁵

Perhaps the paper is something of a passing of the torch for me. As I am at the age when I am slipping off the stage, I can share with you what I think is important for you to know as you continue the conversation with LCMS people in the future. Useful to know will be things like these:

- What the WELS doctrine is,
- What the LCMS doctrine is,
- What the history of WELS/LCMS discussions has been, and
- What the differences are and how the differences have been evaluated.

In the end, however, we should keep in mind—as the title of the paper indicates—that the public ministry is a way that Christ brings blessing to his church. In the fog of doctrinal discussion, we must not lose the forest for the trees. We receive great blessings—both WELS and LCMS—through the public ministry, for which we can thank our gracious Lord.

THE WELS DOCTRINE

The Ministry of the Word – Personal and Public

Let’s start with a short summary of the WELS doctrine of the ministry of the Word. As presented in the previous essay, God has entrusted the Word and sacraments to all believers. Every believer has the right, responsibility, and privilege to proclaim the gospel in daily life.

Throughout human history, God has also ordained that the means of grace be administered publicly by individuals who are specially called. The Old Testament era saw individuals like Abraham, Melchizedek, and Moses, and institutions like the Aaronic priests, the Levites, and the prophets. The public ministry of the Word has taken on new dimensions in the

4. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, “Grabau Versus Walther: The Use of the *Book of Concord* in the American Lutheran Debate on Church and Ministry in the Nineteenth Century,” *CTQ* 75 (2011): 217.

5. I have chosen to say nothing in this paper about ELS. When there have been ministry discussions between WELS and ELS, the points of debate have been no different than between WELS and LCMS.

New Testament era with the earthly ministry of Christ and the establishment of the New Testament church.

The work of the New Testament public ministry is the sharing of the marvelous good news of salvation accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This work of the public ministry is the same as the work of the royal priesthood, but public ministers of the gospel are called by God to share the means of grace in an official capacity on behalf of others.

The church has freedom to configure the public ministry as it deems best—with different “forms,” “grades,” “ranks,” “orders,” or “offices” (all of these terms have been used in the history of the church). As the church selects individuals for public ministry, it keeps in mind the list of qualifications found in the New Testament. Women may serve in some forms of public ministry, but not in forms that involve authority over men.

Entrance into the divinely instituted public ministry is effected through the call of a group of Christians. Although public ministers are gifts of Christ, they are put into their positions through the church. The public ministry is “from Christ through the church.”⁶ It is instituted by Christ, but implemented by the church; it is “*von oben und von unten* [from above and from below].”⁷

The Public Ministry is Divinely Instituted

WELS has sometimes been accused of denying the divine institution of the public ministry.⁸ But if you read WELS literature, you will see that the divine institution of the public ministry is presented in every generation,⁹ and if anything, more strongly in recent decades.

6. This is a favorite expression of John Brug, whose book on the ministry is the essential starting point for everything related to the doctrine of the ministry. See John F. Brug, *The Ministry of the Word* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2009), 133, 141, 396. Similarly, Thesis VII from Walther’s *Kirche und Amt* states that the ministry of the Word is conferred “*von Gott durch die Gemeinde*.” See C. F. W. Walther, *Kirche und Amt* (Erlangen: Andreas Deichert, 1865), 321. An important theme in Brug’s book is that everything in the WELS view is present in Walther and also in Luther.

7. This has been a favorite expression of LCMS President Matthew Harrison in our intersynodical meetings. He includes the idea in C. F. W. Walther, *The Church & The Office of The Ministry*, trans. J. T. Mueller, rev. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia, 2012), 170.

8. In this regard, WELS has often been accused of following J. W. F. Höfling (1802–1853)—a connection denied in the WELS doctrinal statement on the ministry. See WELS, “Theses on the Church and Ministry,” in *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS* (CICR, 1997), 50. The views of Höfling can now be read in English for the first time, since his seminal work has recently been translated. See Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Höfling, *How the Lutheran Church is Constituted*, trans. Michael Holmen (self-pub., 2023). Translator Holmen in his “Preface” suggests that most of the secondary literature about Höfling does not accurately represent what he actually taught (p. iii). For more on Höfling, see Joel L. Pless, “Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Hoefling: The Man and His Ecclesiology,” *WLQ* 106 (2009): 23–33, 83–90, 163–172, 248–260.

9. Already in his first writing about the ministry in 1912, August Pieper stated that the general preaching ministry is a “divine ordinance, ... earned and expressly instituted by Christ.” See August Pieper, “The Voice of Our Church in the Question of Church and Ministry,” trans. James Langebartels (self-pub., 2023), 161.

Of course, there is a natural, inner necessity to have leaders in a group like the church. When I was touring a Quaker meeting house in Philadelphia last summer and I asked what happened when a couple of hundred Quakers would gather, the guide said that leaders who were known to say useful things would sit at the front, and they would speak. There is a natural human need for leaders. But the public ministry is more than just the product of mere human expediency. God wants it, and he has set it up as a permanent institution. Yes, “the Church has the command to appoint ministers” (Ap XIII:12, *Triglot*). But where is the command?

The divine institution of the New Testament public ministry is found in a multitude of words and actions permeating the New Testament¹⁰—seemingly with God’s desire for the public ministry taken for granted, no doubt based on the precedent of the Old Testament. It starts with Christ. Before selecting the twelve apostles, Jesus said to Peter in the presence of his fishing partners, “From now on you will fish for people” (Luke 5:10 NIV). He then went on to select twelve disciples that he “designated apostles” (Luke 6:13), and he later “appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him” (Luke 10:1). In the Pauline epistles, public ministers are said to be gifts of Christ (Eph 4:11), and qualifications for public ministers are laid out—certainly a proof that God expects the public ministry to continue (1 Tim 3:1–13; Titus 1:6–9). Last but not least, in 2 Timothy 2:2 and Titus 1:5, Paul gives direct commands that public ministers be trained and appointed. The New Testament presents the public ministry as something permanent and necessary under normal circumstances for the New Testament church.

What about the Individual Forms or Offices?

The next question is: Should we also talk about the individual forms of the public ministry as divinely instituted? Here one can find some variety among WELS writers.

August Pieper repeatedly stated that all the forms are divinely instituted. He wrote: “Every ministry which for the sake of the congregation promotes the Word alone or a sacrament alone or Word and sacrament together, is instituted by God.”¹¹ Every “species” of the public ministry shares in the divine institution of the “genus,” even though there is no command from God for the species.¹² But Pieper also clarified that these offices are divinely instituted in regard to their essence, not their specific form or title:

10. For a thoughtful paper on the topic, see Joel Fredrich, “The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry” (paper presented at the Chippewa Valley/Wisconsin River Valley Joint Conference, October 18, 1994, revised January 25, 1997).

11. August Pieper, “Toward an Understanding of the Current Discussion on Church and Ministry,” trans. James Langebartels, *The Wauwatosa Theology*, ed. Curtis A. Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2022), 4:272. The same thought is found in August Pieper, “Concerning the Doctrine of the Church and of Its Ministry, With Special Reference to the Synod and Its Discipline,” trans. H. J. Vogel, *WLQ* 59 (1962): 106.

12. August Pieper, “Are There Legal Regulations in the New Testament?,” trans. Carl J. Lawrenz, *WLQ* 86 (1989): 43.

Not only our present congregational pastorate but every other form of the public office of shepherding and teaching (that is *one* thing) like the office of a professor, itinerant preacher, missionary, school teacher, high school instructor, and others, according to their content and general nature, i.e., in so far as they are offices involving gospel proclamation, are instituted and explicitly commanded by God; but as to their specific form they are created and given by the Holy Spirit through the church.¹³

Care in the use of the word “institute” was recommended by J. P. Koehler. In his book review of Schaller’s *Pastorale Praxis*, he recommended that the word *gestiftet*, comparable to our word “instituted,” not be used for individual forms of ministry.¹⁴ He considered *stiften* to be a solemn word that implies divine activity without any human element. He preferred to use the word *schaffen*, comparable to our word “create” or “produce,” for the way in which God raises up specific forms of ministry in the course of human history. In making this suggestion, he recognized that he was dealing simply with the form of expression, not with the substance.¹⁵

No doubt, defining “divine institution” carefully is crucial, otherwise people could talk past each other. If something is “divinely instituted,” does that mean simply that God established it and set it up? Or does it mean that God ordained it as something necessary for all generations?

It seems to me that in the area of religion, other items that we commonly say are “divinely instituted”—marriage, civil government, and the sacraments, for example—tend to be things “which have some degree of permanence and importance, . . . things that we are not free to ignore, alter, or terminate.”¹⁶ With that understanding, it might be wise to refrain from saying that the individual forms are divinely instituted.

Over the years, I have been attracted to the comparison of the public ministry with civil government, which I have seen in John Schaller,¹⁷ Wilbert Gawrisch,¹⁸ Joel Fredrich,¹⁹ and John Brug.²⁰ Civil government is divinely instituted, and every individual serving in the various forms of civil government is “God’s servant” serving in an office “established by God” (Rom 13:1, 4). With that in mind, would you say that the United States presidency is an office that is divinely

13. August Pieper, “Are There Legal Regulations in the New Testament?,” 50. See also August Pieper, “Luther’s Doctrine of Church and Ministry,” trans. Harold Johne, *WLQ* 60 (1963): 261.

14. J. P. Koehler, “Book review of *Pastorale Praxis*,” *TQ* 10 (1913): 300.

15. This paragraph is drawn from Thomas P. Nass, “What Is ‘Divinely Instituted’ and What Is ‘Necessary’ in Regard to the Public Ministry?” (paper presented at the South Atlantic District Pastor/Teacher Conference, January 31, 2003), 7.

16. Joel Fredrich, “The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry,” 4, 9.

17. John Schaller, “The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry,” trans. Roger Fleming, Mark Jeske, Daniel Schaller, and Wilbert Gawrisch, *WLQ* 78 (1981): 50.

18. Wilbert R. Gawrisch, “The Doctrine of Church and Ministry in the Life of the Church Today,” in *Proceedings of the Fifty-first Biennial Convention of WELS*, 1991, 242.

19. Joel Fredrich, “The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry,” 43.

20. Brug, *The Ministry of the Word*, 85–86, 464.

instituted? Maybe you would, since it was set up under God’s overall governance. I would not, because it is not a permanent and necessary institution.

But in the end, the WELS “Theses on the Church and Ministry,” significantly, have only one antithesis: “We hold it to be untenable to say that the pastorate of the local congregation (*Pfarramt*) as a specific form of the public ministry is specifically instituted by the Lord in contrast to other forms of the public ministry.”²¹ Here is the one thing that we agree on: Whether you think that all of the forms are divinely instituted,²² that none of the forms are divinely instituted, or that all of the forms are divinely instituted in one sense and not in another, we agree that no form of ministry has a specific divine institution that sets it apart from the other forms. All the forms are treated equally.

What about the Pastoral Office?

WELS is sometimes thought to have a low view of the pastoral office, because we do not consider this office to be specially instituted by God. In reality, however, WELS has always had a high appreciation for the pastoral office as we have inherited it and perpetuated it—“the most comprehensive form of the public ministry of the Word,” providing “comprehensive spiritual oversight for the gathering and nurturing of souls in congregations.”²³

August Pieper, the fountainhead for WELS writing on the ministry, could gush with full-bodied appreciation for the pastoral office. He wrote: “The parish ministry in the form customary among us is the chief species, the most complete, most important, most necessary species of the ecclesiastical ministry.”²⁴ How about this quote:

To give up the glorious divine gift of the congregational pastorate, similar to the episcopate of the middle apostolic age, though not identical, without offering something better and of equal value in its place, would mean despising God’s gift for the edification of his kingdom of grace and would be hindering the same.... It would indeed be an outrageous despising of Christ and his gospel if in fleshly arbitrariness the church would abolish the pastors and teachers whom God has made proficient for her in the administration of Word and sacrament and would go over to having inadequate lay preachers take turns preaching.”²⁵

Robust language is also offered by John Brug: “The work of the pastor will almost always have a greater effect on the congregation than that of any other person.... A shepherding

21. WELS, “Theses on the Church and Ministry,” 51.

22. Pieper, of course, preferred this option. See August Pieper, “Luther’s Teaching of the Christian Priesthood,” trans. John Jeske, *The Wauwatosa Theology*, ed. Curtis A. Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2022), 4:299.

23. WELS, *This We Believe* (CICR, 1999), 30.

24. August Pieper, “Toward an Understanding,” 272.

25. August Pieper, “Are There Legal Regulations in the New Testament?,” 47–48.

office for local congregations, whether held by one man or shared by several, is more necessary than other forms of public ministry due to the fundamental importance of its work. Under normal circumstances such an office is indispensable for a congregation.”²⁶ Male overseers of congregations are indispensable and necessary, not because this form of ministry is specially commanded. (It is not.) Rather, such overseers are inevitable because God wants Christians to form local congregations, he wants there to be a public ministry, and he wants men to be the leaders.

Who can deny that our church enjoys many blessings by having well-trained pastors who share the means of grace and carry out spiritual oversight? Recently a WELS layman talked with me about what he finds as he visits WELS churches around the country. He finds the same message of sin and grace. How is this possible in a world overflowing with sects of every sort? While a parish pastor in Milwaukee in 1994, I had opportunity to write a paper about the pastoral ministry. I identified “orderliness” and “purity of doctrine” as two blessings that can come when well-trained pastors are called to oversee in the church, and I mentioned the high opinion that WELS has historically had of the pastoral ministry.²⁷ Humanly speaking, here is the answer.

In that paper—written as Northwestern College was about to move to New Ulm in 1995—I also expressed the hope that WELS would continue its thorough training of pastors. I think we have done that at Martin Luther College.²⁸ If I see a place today where the thoroughness of pastoral training is discussed, it is in world mission strategy, where there is trend away from residential seminaries toward online education with periodic in-person instruction and observation.

Though there are many benefits in these modern methods, there are also risks. It takes time for the gospel to soak in and for ministry candidates to grasp what Lutheran law/gospel preaching is. The New Testament sets high standards for elders (1 Tim 3:1–7), and some of the necessary characteristics can only be recognized over time through personal contact. Deacons “must first be tested” (1 Tim 3:10), and Paul told Timothy: “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands” (1 Tim 5:22). I hope that we don’t lower the bar in our training of pastors, whom we expect to stand on their own two feet as church leaders.²⁹

26. Brug, *The Ministry of the Word*, 111.

27. Thomas P. Nass, “The Pastoral Ministry as a Distinct Form of the Public Ministry,” *WLQ* 91 (1994): 263–66.

28. There have been two significant curriculum changes for the pastor track at Martin Luther College since 1995, one that was implemented in 2001 and the other in 2025. Some nice enhancements have been made, for example, in the area of public speaking and interpersonal communication. Greek and Hebrew remain largely the same, with Greek having two more required credits. The only major change is that some pre-seminary students no longer study a non-biblical language at MLC. German and Latin offerings have been expanded, but only students who have the gifts and the interest select them.

29. Some of the thoughts of this paragraph are found in Paul O. Wendland, “Church and Ministry in World Mission Settings,” (unpublished manuscript, shared privately with author, October 9, 2023). From what I can see, these concerns are in the minds of WELS missionaries connected with *Academia Cristo*. See Andrew Johnston, “*Aquí tu Paz: The Missiology of Academia Cristo*” (unpublished manuscript, shared privately with author, January 2024).

The Role of J. P. Koehler

To understand the WELS ministry position, it is useful to recall how it came about. Thanks in large part to his own historical record, we can identify J. P. Koehler as the main initiator of the discussion in our circles.

At various church conferences from the late 1870s through 1910, the status of Christian teachers was discussed—with some saying that the teaching office was a secular office derived from the authority of parents, but with many saying that the teaching office was derived from the pastoral office, which was the one divinely instituted office. In his *History*, Koehler reports how challenges were offered to the traditional understanding by himself and others—challenges like the following: “Why detour thru the office of the pastor in order to establish the divine character of the teacher’s call?... Why then should not Acts 20:28: ‘The Holy Ghost hath made you overseers over the flock’ apply to teachers as well as to pastors, and to the other church officers whose work does not constitute laboring in the Word in its specific sense?”³⁰

Koehler gives the following account of a meeting that was particularly significant because of the two main debaters—Koehler and John Schaller. It strikes me how the core of the debate at that time is the same as that between WELS and LCMS today, over a century later.

For the fifth time the teacher’s call came under discussion, this time in Milwaukee in 1908 [in his *History*, Koehler gives 1909 as the year] at a gathering of a mixed conference of pastors and teachers. The essayist [John Schaller] there presented his thoughts on the subject in roughly the following manner: In the church there is just one office, the office of the pastor, or the parish office. This office includes all activity necessary for the building of the kingdom of God. This office alone is founded by God. All others are diaconal offices, branch offices, ancillary offices not founded by God but offshoots which in the course of church history the church in Christian freedom has caused to branch off. To this class belong the teachers and elders of a congregation, high school, college and theological professors, presidents, visiting pastors, and missionaries of Synod, etc. To support this conception he cited Acts 6 which tells how the diaconate was established....

This presentation invited the criticism [in his *History*, Koehler identifies himself as the critic] that it failed to take into consideration the entire scale of Scriptural allusions to this subject and therefore in a number of instances the attempted connection does not quite hit the mark. The body of Scriptural references on the interrelationship of the various offices in the Apostolic era demonstrates a development of ecclesiastical officeholding whose particulars are insufficiently discernible to justify such differentiation in the assessment of the various offices in the contemporary church.... We are told there were prophets, evangelists, shepherds, teachers, performers of miracles, helpers and lastly bishops and

30. J. P. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, ed. Leigh D. Jordahl (St. Cloud, MN: Sentinel Publishing Company for the Protestant Conference, 1970), 232.

elders, and their activity was equally ascribed to God. Nothing at all is stated of the origin, organization and exercise of these orders except for one specific case where Titus is charged with the disposition of this arrangement and another case where an election by the congregation is intimated, and that not all elders preached.³¹

The Wauwatosa faculty (Koehler, Pieper, and Schaller) went on to study the doctrine together, and the three of them coalesced around the exegetical conclusions of Koehler. August Pieper became the author of the majority of the key articles, with the result that he could refer to the doctrine as *meine Amtslehre* (my teaching of the ministry).³² Schaller also wrote a significant essay. But Fredrich summarizes the situation this way: “Koehler did the exegetical pioneering and Pieper did the bulk of the writing.”³³

What is Behind the WELS Doctrine

What was behind the Wauwatosa modifications on the doctrine of the ministry? First, there was the determination of the Wauwatosa theologians to settle all matters of doctrine by going to the Scriptures alone, and not by relying on “Father Theology” (*Vätertheologie*).

The four-volume anthology of essays, *The Wauwatosa Theology*, wisely begins with Koehler’s 1925 opening address at the seminary, “The Connected Study of Holy Scripture, the Heart of Theological Study.”³⁴ The second essay is Pieper’s “Foreword to Volume 10 of the *Quartalschrift*,” in which he stated that the particular assignment of the *Quartalschrift* was “to speak in favor of direct Scriptural theology and to encourage the study of Scripture among us.”³⁵ The third selection is Pieper’s essay, “Scripture Study as the Special Task of the Pastor.”³⁶ This emphasis on Scripture—the *ad fontes* approach—is the hallmark of the Wauwatosa theologians, and their reexamination of the doctrine of the ministry is the textbook example of their approach.

When the Wauwatosa theologians began interacting with the St. Louis theologians on the ministry, Koehler detected a different method of interpretation. Instead of careful exegesis, there was a repetition of standard doctrinal formulae. Koehler wrote:

31. Koehler, “The Doctrine Pertaining to the Office of the Ministry,” trans. Paul Hensel, *Faith-Life*, 47, no. 5 (September/October 1974): 8. For more on these meetings from Koehler’s perspective, see “J. P. Koehler’s Retrospective,” trans. Carl Springer, *Faith-Life* 76, no. 2 (March/April, 2003): 16–20.

32. Edward C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992), 110. Koehler explains that he did not write much on the subject of church and ministry because he was tied down with other work at the seminary. See J. P. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 238.

33. E. C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 238.

34. J. P. Koehler, “The Connected Study of Holy Scripture, the Heart of Theological Study,” trans. M. A. Zimmermann, rev. James Langebartels, *The Wauwatosa Theology*, ed. Curtis A. Jahn, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997), 1:99–108.

35. August Pieper, “Foreword to Volume 10 of the *Quartalschrift*,” trans. Philemon Hensel, rev. James Langebartels, *The Wauwatosa Theology*, 1:109.

36. August Pieper, “Scripture Study as the Special Task of the Pastor” trans. James Langebartels, *The Wauwatosa Theology*, 1:119–30.

Two other meetings with the St. Louisans, of like futility, took place.... The real issue was the definition of the term “institution” as applied to the church and the office of the ministry in their concrete form. That afforded a striking illustration of the difference in the method of interpretation; on the one side, the linguistic-historical research to establish the meaning of the Scriptures and formulate that dogmatically; on the other side, the interpretation of the terms according to the preconceived dogmatic notions.³⁷

A second consideration for the Wauwatosa theologians was the concern that ordinances of a legal character not be set up for New Testament Christians.³⁸ In the Old Testament, when God was dealing with the Israelites as minor-aged children, he gave his believers detailed ceremonial laws. But not in the New Testament, where the gospel is supreme and God guides his believers through the Holy Spirit. Here, “the gospel creates its own forms.”³⁹ Whether or not the Wauwatosa theologians overstated this point can be debated.⁴⁰ But they can be admired for trying to preserve for the New Testament church all the freedom that Christ has given to it.

The Unity of WELS in this Doctrine

It is often pointed out that in the early part of the twentieth century, WELS was not united on the doctrine of the ministry. For example, August Ernst—who served as president of Northwestern College for forty-eight years and was the first president of the Federation of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Other States in 1892—never accepted the teaching of the Wauwatosa theologians. That Ernst was a close friend of LCMS is shown by the fact that he was granted an honorary doctorate from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis through its president, Franz Pieper, in 1915.⁴¹

The historical record suggests to me, however, that an overall unity on this topic was achieved in WELS by the middle of the twentieth century, and it has persisted to this day. In what is available for me to read, there is a continuous stream of theological writing in WELS saying basically the same thing on the ministry, from J. P. Meyer,⁴² Carl Lawrenz,⁴³ Armin Schuetze,⁴⁴ to John Brug and many others. The ongoing, united work of the Wauwatosa

37. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 238.

38. See August Pieper, “Are There Legal Regulations in the New Testament?” 38–42.

39. Joel Fredrich, “The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry,” 12.

40. See Brug, *The Ministry of the Word*, 84. Also Joel Fredrich, “The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry,” 13–15.

41. Erwin Ernst Kowalke, *Centennial Story: Northwestern College, 1865–1965* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1965), 124.

42. J. P. Meyer taught at the seminary from 1920–1964, and he did much to carry the Wauwatosa doctrine of the ministry forward in the twentieth century. The dogmatics notes that I was given at the seminary in 1979 were produced by J. P. Meyer, and these notes present the Wauwatosa doctrine of the ministry fully. He was an active participant in the meetings with LCMS in the 1930s that produced the Thiensville Theses.

43. Carl J. Lawrenz, “The Scriptural Truths of the Church and Its Ministry,” *WLQ* 82 (1985): 167–85.

44. Armin W. Schuetze, *Church–Mission–Ministry* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1995).

theologians, no doubt, did much to solidify the synod in the early years. August Ernst died in 1924, but August Pieper continued to teach at the seminary until 1941. John Schaller's pastoral theology textbook, with the Wauwatosa teaching in its "Vorwort,"⁴⁵ was used at the seminary long after Schaller's death in 1920. And Koehler's *History* told the intriguing story of how the Wauwatosa doctrine came about. Disunity in the beginning, yes, but not for long.

THE LCMS DOCTRINE

LCMS Teaching Focuses on the Pastor

What I see in LCMS is a tunnel-visioned focus on the pastoral office, commonly referred to as "The Office of the Holy Ministry" (OHM) or "The Preaching Office." This office is the one office that is divinely instituted, and all men in this office are entrusted with the full use of the means of grace.

Who exactly is in this office? Historically in LCMS, only pastors who were called to a local congregation were considered to be in the pastoral office. An individual called into an itinerant ministry, for example, "was not ordained and was not considered a pastor."⁴⁶ Gradually, however, the understanding of the pastoral office has broadened. Wohlrabe sees a marked change from 1952 until 1962, when ordination and the pastoral office were redefined. Ordination became "the certification that an individual was qualified for the full function of the office of the ministry ... no matter to what office he was called," and a pastor became anyone who "was qualified for the office and ordained, regardless of where he was serving or what functions he was performing."⁴⁷ LCMS participants in the recent intersynodical discussions have emphasized this broader understanding of the pastoral office. In other words, if you think that LCMS administrators and professors are not in the pastoral office according to LCMS doctrine, you are relying on an outdated understanding. If such workers have been ordained, they are in the pastoral office. The office is broader than just the parish pastorate.

45. John Schaller, *Pastorale Praxis* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1913), IV–VI. Here is a translation of a few of Schaller's sentences, found in Martin O. Westerhaus, "The Wauwatosa Theology: The Men and Their Message," *The Wauwatosa Theology*, 1:73.

The concept of the (*Pfarramt*) pastoral office is a changeable entity in history, just as in general all ecclesiastical arrangements experienced many alterations in the course of the centuries.... Since God has ordained no definite forms in which the public ministry of the congregation (*Predigtienst*) must be administered in his congregation, with the exception of the apostolate, it has been left to the church of all times so to construct these forms itself which serve for her edification and preservation, and so to assign them to her servants as is suitable for the circumstances in which it lives at the time.

46. John Wohlrabe, *An Historical Analysis of the Doctrine of the Ministry in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Until 1962* (ThD diss., Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1987), 381.

47. Wohlrabe, *An Historical Analysis of the Doctrine of the Ministry*, 385. This broader perspective is found in the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) document on the ministry from 1981. See CTCR, *The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature* (September 1981), 20–21.

According to LCMS, the church has freedom to establish auxiliary or helping offices to support the pastoral office. These other forms of ministry (Lutheran school teachers, directors of Christian education, deacons, etc.) are derived from the pastoral office, and they perform certain functions of the pastoral office that are delegated to them. There are some ministerial functions, however, that must be done only by an ordained pastor.

The LCMS's focus on the pastoral ministry shows up everywhere. The new LCMS catechism, in its section dealing with the keys and confession, states that only pastors are to use the keys publicly: "While the Office of the Keys is given to the whole Church, only those who are called as pastors are given the responsibility to exercise it publicly, that is, on behalf of the Church."⁴⁸ The 46-page CTCR report on the *Theology and Practice of "the Divine Call"* is entirely devoted to the pastoral ministry, except for this one sentence tucked away in a footnote: "Conclusions may then be drawn about calls of individuals into auxiliary offices to the extent that these participate in and support the office of the public ministry."⁴⁹ The voters at LCMS conventions are 50% pastors and 50% lay members of congregations; it is impossible for an active "commissioned minister" (i.e., a synodically recognized "minister of the gospel" in a position other than the pastoral office)⁵⁰ ever to be a voter.⁵¹

Here is the most recent writing of the CTCR that I have seen on the ministry. Notice the focus on the ordained pastor.

The pastoral ministry is the means God uses to preach the Word and administer the sacraments in the local congregation.... The local congregation is comprised of pastors and laity, preachers and hearers, who work together reciprocally in the ministry of the church.... The office of the public ministry is required for a congregation and is not merely optional, so that the Gospel may be heard and received sacramentally.... Exceptional circumstances do not make the pastoral office optional for congregational life.... If a congregation lacks an ordained pastor to carry out the responsibilities of the public ministry in an orderly and regular manner and persistently remains in this status, it is no longer functioning in accordance with God's design for the local expression of the church.⁵²

48. *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2017), 319. In contrast, the new WELS catechism has a paragraph speaking in a general way about "Spiritual Leaders." See *Luther's Catechism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2017), 334–35.

49. CTCR, *Theology and Practice of "the Divine Call,"* (February 2003), 5.

50. LCMS has eight categories of "ministers of religion—commissioned": teachers, directors of Christian education (DCE), directors of Christian outreach (DCO), directors of family life ministry (DFLM), directors of parish music (DPM), deaconesses, parish assistants, and directors of church ministries (DCM).

51. This is a bone of contention for some commissioned ministers. See David L. Rueter, *Called to Serve: A Theology of Commissioned Ministry* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2019), 8–9, 94, 115–16.

52. CTCR, *Mission and Ministry Principles and Practical Observations and Suggestions* (October 4, 2024), 2–3.

More Unified on Forms than in Previous Decades

For those who are unacquainted with LCMS history, it may be surprising to learn that in the mid-twentieth century, the “WELS view of the ministry” was promoted by a number of leaders in LCMS. In 1949, August C. Stelhorn, the LCMS Secretary of Schools from 1921–1960, presented “The Lutheran Teacher’s Position in the Ministry of the Congregation,” available in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary online essay file.⁵³ WELS-congenial articles that were published in LCMS journals include H. G. Brueggemann, “The Public Ministry in the Apostolic Age,”⁵⁴ and Paul A. Zimmerman, “The Lutheran Teacher—Minister of the Church.”⁵⁵

A fascinating book—one that I wish could be reprinted—is *The Ministry of the Lutheran Teacher* by Arnold C. Mueller, published by Concordia in 1964. Mueller was the LCMS editor of Sunday school materials from 1933–1966, and the cover page says that the book was “Authorized by the Board of Parish Education” of LCMS. This book is a full-throttled, scholarly presentation of the ministry position that has found a home in WELS, showing how this position is in harmony with Scripture, Luther, and great Lutheran theologians of the past.

What happened? To understand the history of the ministry discussion in LCMS, I think you need to compare the CTCR report from 1973, *The Ministry in Its Relation to the Christian Church*,⁵⁶ with the CTCR report from 1981, *The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature*.⁵⁷ There is a sea change between these two documents: The 1973 document is quite amenable to the WELS position and the 1981 document is not.⁵⁸

The 1973 CTCR document states:

Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions do not, however, teach that this Ministry must have one form, but rather show that various functions of the Ministry may be performed by various men. According to their functions they may be called elders, bishops, evangelists, pastors, or teachers. The church distributes the various functions included in the Gospel Ministry among a greater or smaller number of persons, according to need and circumstances.⁵⁹

53. A similar Stelhorn paper from 1952 entitled “The Lutheran Teacher in the Ministry of the Church” is available online through Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne.

54. H. G. Brueggemann, “The Public Ministry in the Apostolic Age,” *CTM* 22 (1951): 81–109.

55. Paul A. Zimmerman, “The Lutheran Teacher—Minister of the Church,” *Lutheran Education* 116, no. 1 (September/October 1980): 40–54.

56. CTCR, *The Ministry in Its Relation to the Christian Church* (March 1973). As comprehensive as John Brug’s book on the ministry is, I am surprised that this 1973 CTCR document is not mentioned or included in his bibliography.

57. CTCR, *The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature* (September 1981).

58. Keep in mind: Much was happening in LCMS at this time. The walkout at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, took place on February 19, 1974. The fact that the WELS view of ministry was held by some Seminex leaders may have helped to prejudice conservatives against it.

59. *The Ministry in Its Relation to the Christian Church*, 9.

The document goes on to recommend that “the Synod approve the ordination of synodically certified and called male teachers and directors of Christian education.”⁶⁰ It supports the concept of ordained deacons and evangelists, with the recognition that the sum total of the functions of the ministry “can rarely, if ever, be performed by one man.”⁶¹

The 1981 CTCR document, in contrast, doubles down on the pastoral office as the one divinely mandated office, within which are contained “all the functions of the ministry of Word and sacrament.”⁶² This pastoral office is “the office of the public ministry,” and only men in this office should be ordained. Other offices, called auxiliary offices, may be created by the church to help the pastor with some of his functions. Such offices “are ‘ministry’ and they are ‘public,’ yet they are not *the* office of the public ministry.”⁶³ Here we have—full-blown—what we have historically understood to be “the LCMS doctrine.” Interestingly, in my spring 1982 dogmatics notes from Siegbert Becker, I recorded this comment: “I’m disappointed with the latest LCMS statement. I thought this had gone by the board in LCMS.”⁶⁴

In the past few decades, from what I can see, the language of *The Ministry* has become the standard for everything officially published in LCMS.⁶⁵ Everything now is about “the Office of the Public Ministry” (= pastoral office) which is divinely instituted. The earlier LCMS articles that favored the WELS position were often written by men who had a special interest in the service of teachers in LCMS.⁶⁶ In contrast, the 2019 Concordia book published by commissioned minister David Rueter speaks the language of the 1981 CTCR document perfectly, and it accuses WELS of false teaching on the ministry.⁶⁷ I feel confident that Concordia Publishing House would never publish A. C. Mueller’s *The Ministry of the Lutheran Teacher* today.

To some degree, LCMS is a big tent doctrinally. In regard to the ministry, there is debate whether the Great Commission and AC V deal with the royal priesthood or the pastoral office. Not everyone says the same thing about ordination. But LCMS seems more united today than previously in what people say about the forms of the public ministry, and it is the position of *The*

60. *The Ministry in Its Relation to the Christian Church*, 10. Of course, WELS voted to ordain male teachers at its 1991 convention, but at its 2001 convention decided to return to the previous practice of ordaining only pastors. See Edward C. Fredrich and John M. Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2025), 301.

61. *The Ministry in Its Relation to the Christian Church*, 11–12.

62. *The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature*, 12.

63. *The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature*, 12.

64. Becker left LCMS in 1963, and he taught at WLS from 1969–1984. Of course, he had to make peace with the WELS doctrine of the ministry when colloquizing into WELS. In my dogmatics notes, I recorded this comment of his: “When I looked for a command of institution for the pastoral office, I couldn’t find one.”

65. The last pro-WELS publications that I have seen in LCMS are: Mark Schuler, “Ministry: Some New Testament Perspectives,” *Issues in Christian Education* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 10–16; and James H. Pragman, “Ministry: The Views of a Lutheran Pastor,” *Issues in Christian Education* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 17–21.

66. Such is the case with Stellhorn, Zimmermann, and Mueller who were previously mentioned.

67. Rueter, *Called to Serve: A Theology of Commissioned Ministry*, 69, 78, 82–83.

Ministry from 1981.⁶⁸ Needless to say, this only makes our conversations with LCMS on the ministry more complicated.

More Extreme than in Previous Decades

Another complicating factor is that the frame of mind of some LCMS leaders seems to be tilting away from C. F. W. Walther more in the direction of Loehe⁶⁹ and Grabau⁷⁰—toward positions that some might call romanizing or sacerdotalism. For example, a respected Fort Wayne professor has written an article suggesting that Loehe can be seen as “a corrective to Walther’s understanding of the office.”⁷¹ Efforts have been made to rehabilitate Grabau, while distancing from Walther.⁷²

I think the shift is apparent in comments about AC V. It is quite common in the last thirty years for LCMS leaders to take AC V as a reference to the concrete public ministry, and not to the abstract sharing of the means of grace in general.⁷³ This concrete understanding certainly existed in the early doctrinal writing of Lutheranism, but it was not the understanding

68. My conclusion here is different from John Brug, writing in 2009. See Brug, *The Ministry of the Word*, 453–55, 473. In the intersynodical meetings of the past thirteen years, the LCMS leaders have seemed united in what they say about the forms of the public ministry.

69. Wilhelm Loehe (1808–1872) of Neuendettelsau, Germany, did much to help LCMS in its earliest years, but Loehe and Walther parted company in 1853 because they didn’t agree on church and ministry. Loehe taught that ordination was necessary, conferring the office and imparting grace and spiritual powers. Loehe taught the ministerium should propagate itself, and laypeople should not be allowed to elect their pastors.

70. John A. A. Grabau (1804–1879) immigrated to Buffalo, NY, as a confessional Lutheran pastor in 1839, and in 1845 he founded the Buffalo Synod. Grabau had an acrimonious relationship with Walther and LCMS because of differences in the doctrine of the ministry, starting with his *Hirtenbrief* (“Pastoral Letter”) of 1840. Grabau taught that ordination was a divine institution and an essential part of the *rite vocatus* of AC XIV. Grabau taught that a congregation should obey its pastor in all matters not contrary to the Word of God.

71. John T. Pless, “Wilhelm Löhe: His Voice Still Heard in Walther’s Church,” *CTQ* 75 (2011): 328. See also Daniel S. Johnson, “The Ministry and the Schoolmaster,” *Logia* 6, no. 3 (Trinity 1997): 19; and Stephen Pietsch, “Wilhelm Loehe’s Doctrine of the Office of Ministry in Historical and Contemporary Perspective,” *CurTM* 51, no. 2 (April 2024): 5–10.

72. See Naomichi Masaki, “Augsburg Confession XIV: Does It Answer Current Questions on the Holy Ministry?,” *CTQ* 70 (2006): 123–62; and Benjamin T. G. Mayes, “Grabau Versus Walther,” 217–52.

73. For examples, see Robert David Preus, “The Doctrine of the Call in the Confessions and Lutheran Orthodoxy,” first presented in 1991, published in *Church and Ministry Today: Three Confessional Lutheran Essays*, ed. John A. Maxfield (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 2001), 2. David P. Scaer, “Augustana V and the Doctrine of the Ministry,” *LQ* 6 (1992): 403–23. Norman Nagel, “*Externum Verbum*: Testing Augustana V on the Doctrine of the Holy Ministry,” *Logia* 6, no. 3 (Trinity 1997): 27–32. John F. Johnson, “The Office of the Pastoral Ministry: Scriptural and Confessional Considerations,” in *Church and Ministry: The Collected Papers of the 150th Anniversary Theological Convocation of the LCMS*, ed. Jerald C. Joersz and Paul T. McCain (St. Louis: Concordia, 1998), 84. David P. Scaer, “The Lutheran Confessions on the Holy Ministry with a Few Thoughts on Hoefling,” *Logia* 8, no. 4 (Reformation 1999): 39.

of Synodical Conference church fathers like Walther,⁷⁴ Koren (Norwegian Synod),⁷⁵ Hoenecke⁷⁶ and Loy (Ohio Synod).⁷⁷ It historically was not the prevailing view in LCMS,⁷⁸ and it is not the way that AC V has been taught in WELS.⁷⁹

WELS participants in the recent intersynodical meetings have been surprised at the strong language shared by LCMS participants about ordination. Walther hedged about the necessity of ordination over against Grabau who considered it absolutely necessary. For current LCMS leaders, ordination is needed according AC XIV. Franz Pieper was known to say that “ordination confers nothing” upon the one ordained,⁸⁰ but some in LCMS today openly contradict that. Concordia Fort Wayne Professor David Scaer considers ordination “more than an adiaphoron, a human rite.”⁸¹ Former St. Louis professor Norman E. Nagel wrote that Walther spoke of ordination “in a way that falls short of the confessions.”⁸²

WELS participants have also been caught off-guard by some statements made about absolution. LCMS leaders see a difference between the announcement of forgiveness spoken by a called and ordained pastor and any other Christian. Because of his office, the pastor can say with authority, “In Christ’s stead, I forgive you your sins”—a “performative absolution.” Any other Christian, should say, “Christ forgives you”—a “declaration of grace.”⁸³ This teaching can be found in an article by Concordia St. Louis Professor David Maxwell, in which he states: “The laity speak the gospel and deliver forgiveness to the hearer, but not as the authorized representatives of Christ. They do not stand in Christ’s stead, as a pastor does.”⁸⁴ Students at

74. C. F. W. Walther, *The Church & The Office of The Ministry*, 169.

75. U. Vilhelm Koren, “What the Norwegian Synod has Wanted and Still Wants,” in *Faith of Our Fathers*, ed. George Oliver Lillegard (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1953), 71.

76. Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, trans. Joel Fredrich, Paul Prange, and Bill Tackmier (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1999), 4:187.

77. Matthias Loy, *The Augsburg Confession: An Introduction to Its Study and an Exposition of Its Contents* (Columbus: Lutheran Book Concern, 1908), 503.

78. See Roland Ziegler, “Walther and AC V,” *CTQ* 76 (2012): 328–29; John H. C. Fritz, *Pastoral Theology*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1945), 33; and Eugene F. Klug, “Augsburg V: Intent and Meaning of the Confessors on ‘Ministry,’” *CJ* 17 (1991): 30–42.

79. Brug, *The Ministry of the Word*, 332–52.

80. Lawrence R. Rast Jr., “Franz Pieper on the Office of the Holy Ministry,” in *The Pieper Lectures: The Office of the Ministry* (St. Louis: Concordia Historical Institute and the Luther Academy, 1997), 159.

81. David P. Scaer, *Ordination: Human Rite or Divine Ordinance* (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1983), 16.

82. Norman E. Nagel, “The Divine Call in *Die Rechte Gestalt* of C. F. W. Walther,” *CTQ* 59 (1995): 178.

83. In a private email on August 20, 2025, John Brug highlighted absolution as a key issue. He wrote: “The most crucial issue is absolution. Here, to borrow a term from the Luther/Erasmus debates, is the jugular. If the absolution that the lady teacher offers in the classroom to a repentant child carries the same power as the absolution given by the pastor in confession, every other question about ministry is swept away. Is the absolution by the teacher a real and full means of grace or just a pointer to grace?”

84. David R. Maxwell, “The Function of the Pastoral Office in the Lutheran Confessions,” in *Pastoral Theology in the Light of the Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Jason Gehrke and Jennifer H. Maxfield (St. Louis: Luther Academy, 2012), 36. See also Daniel S. Johnson, “The Ministry and the Schoolmaster,” 18.

Concordia Fort Wayne, according to the seminary student handbook, are not to preside at the Lord's Supper, nor even to pronounce the absolution in communion services.⁸⁵

A book that has been circulating widely in LCMS recently—with copies given to all participants in the current intersynodical meetings—is *Office and Ordination in Luther and Melancthon* by Hellmut Lieberg.⁸⁶ The Luther quotes in the first half of this book are pure gold. But in the last half of the book dealing with Melancthon, as I pointed out in a *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* review, Lieberg “has a strong desire to magnify ordination as an essential rite that puts a man into the public office and that conveys a spiritual blessing. In his concluding remarks, Lieberg suggests that contemporary confessional Lutherans should pay more attention to theologians like Stahl, Vilmar, Löhe, and Kliefoth on the ministry.”⁸⁷ This volume would support people who would like to drift away from Walther, and its recent publication by Concordia catches one's attention.⁸⁸

When the Missourians of the 1840s shared their concerns with Grabau about his *Hirtenbrief*, they accused him of mixing what is human with what is divine “so that Christian freedom is restricted,” and of attributing “more to the office of the ministry than what is due.”⁸⁹ It is ironic that we today find ourselves worrying about the same concerns in the Missourians of the 2020s.

An Example of Current LCMS Thinking: The Licensed Lay Deacon Controversy

At the LCMS convention in Wichita in 1989, the decision was made—after vigorous and protracted debate—to allow “licensed lay deacons” to temporarily preach and administer the sacraments in exceptional circumstances or in emergencies. This decision was made as LCMS struggled to provide pastoral services everywhere with the available pool of ordained pastors. Intense controversy followed this decision in subsequent years until the decision was finally reversed at the 2016 convention.⁹⁰ By 2016, there were 331 such deacons who were either

85. This fact was shared in our meetings and was included on our in-house list of differences.

86. Hellmut Lieberg, *Office and Ordination in Luther and Melancthon*, trans. Matthew Carver (St. Louis: Concordia, 2020). The original was *Amt und Ordination bei Luther und Melancthon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963).

87. Thomas P. Nass, review of *Office and Ordination in Luther and Melancthon* by Hellmut Lieberg, *WLQ* 119 (2022): 241.

88. Curiously, a 1989 LCMS article spoke critically of Lieberg's evaluation of Melancthon. See Ken Schurb, “Melancthon on Church and Ministry,” *CJ* 15 (1989): 457.

89. “Evaluation of Grabau's *Hirtenbrief* by Gotthold Heinrich Loeber with C. F. Gruber and C. F. W. Walther (July 1843),” trans. William Schumacher, in *Soli Deo Gloria: Essays on C. F. W. Walther In Memory of August R. Suelflow* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000), 156–57. Also found in Walther, *The Church & The Office of the Ministry*, 380.

90. Already in 1991, Robert Preus condemned the decision. See Robert Preus, “The Doctrine of the Call in the Confessions and Lutheran Orthodoxy,” 38. For a collection of LCMS articles in favor of Licensed Lay Deacons see *Issues in Christian Education* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2004).

regularly or occasionally preaching and/or administering the sacraments.⁹¹ The 2016 convention resolved that if these deacons wanted to continue to preach and administer the sacraments, they would have to apply to enter a program resulting in ordination as a pastor. The licensed lay deacon program was coming to an end.

The main rationale was the contention that AC XIV requires preaching and administering the sacraments to be done only by an ordained pastor. Of course, AC XIV does not explicitly mention ordination; it says: “No one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called [*rite vocatus*]” (*Triglot*).⁹² But the Task Force Report insisted that ordination is part of what is necessary in order to be *rite vocatus*: “The confessional understanding of *rite vocatus* involves three elements: examination (or certification), call, and ordination.... *Rite vocatus* includes this whole process. None of these three aspects is negotiable or unnecessary.”⁹³ The Task Force goes on to admit that ordination, as a rite, is not mandated by the Lord. But, “we believe omitting any of these elements would be schismatic and contrary to the ‘catholicity’ of the Church and the unity of our Syndical fellowship.”⁹⁴

What is Behind the LCMS Doctrine

Is there an explanation for the circling of the wagons around the pastoral office in LCMS? I will offer a few suggestions.

When LCMS leaders explain their hermeneutical approach, it often sounds good. First come the Scriptures as the source of doctrine, then the Lutheran Confessions, and then other Christian teachers.⁹⁵ That being said, LCMS theologians have a very high regard for the history and traditions of the church, and they can sometimes give the impression of shortchanging the Bible in favor of historical theology. This can make WELS observers suspect that there is a different hermeneutical method, just as J. P. Koehler feared years ago.

For example, the main reason given recently for requiring ordination is the LCMS understanding of AC XIV, not clear Scripture. LCMS leaders in our meetings also have been

91. See “2013 Resolution 4-06A Task Force Report to the Synod,” available at <https://files.lcms.org>, 6.

92. Jacobs and Tappert also translate “regularly called,” and Kolb-Wengert “properly called.” In contrast, McCain has “with a rightly ordered call,” no doubt with a nod to ordination. This note is added: “When this article was presented, it was understood that a call into the preaching office would be confirmed and formally recognized by means of the apostolic rite of ordination (with prayer and the laying on of hands).” See McCain, 62–63.

93. “2013 Resolution 4-06A Task Force Report to the Synod,” 10. This seems to be the same as what Grabau taught. According to Grabau, “ordination is an absolutely essential part of *rite vocatus*.... Grabau placed the entire weight of ordination on the *vocatus* of AC XIV.” See William M. Cwirla, “Grabau and the Saxon Pastors: The Doctrine of the Holy Ministry, 1840–1845,” *CHIQ* 68, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 95.

94. “2013 Resolution 4-06A Task Force Report to the Synod,” 11.

95. For Walther at his best, see his essay from the 1884 Synodical Conference convention: C. F. W. Walther, “Church Fathers and Doctrine,” *Essays for the Church*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992), 2:67–101. See also Norman Nagel, “The Doctrine of the Office of the Holy Ministry in the Confessions and in Walther’s *Kirche und Amt*,” *CJ* 15 (1989): 423, 442.

comfortable saying that the Lutheran Confessions are a lens or roadmap for reading the Bible, something that WELS authors, including myself, have been reluctant to say.⁹⁶

With the doctrine of the ministry, Walther's theses from *Kirche und Amt* seem to cast a shadow everywhere. Prime energy is spent parsing Walther's words and rehearsing the early Perry County history in Missouri, when a fresh study of the Scriptures might be more beneficial. In the process, LCMS theologians often grab phrases from Walther and put undo weight on them, maneuvering them in a direction that, from the perspective of WELS, is different from what Walther intended, if you look at the totality of his writings. For a little more on this topic, see Appendix #4.

Beyond that, I sense that the current LCMS emphasis on the pastoral office is a component in the conservative/confessional revival that leaders are overseeing—trying to undo the damage of the theological liberalism of the 1950s and 1960s. Part of the solution for righting the ship in LCMS is to have well-trained seminary graduates as pastors who can guide with an emphasis on the historic doctrines of the church. For them, a clearly defined pastoral office also provides a convenient line in the matter of man-woman roles. Women can do everything except the distinctive functions of the pastoral office.

Finally, what an organization emphasizes also reflects what they fear most and what they want to avoid. What current LCMS leaders seem to fear most is not romanizing, but rather the minimizing of the pastoral office, perhaps furthered by the church growth movement. LCMS leaders have told us that if LCMS had the WELS doctrine, they fear that church life in LCMS could descend into chaos, with church entities doing their own thing in regard to ministry requirements and training.

THE HISTORY OF WELS/LCMS DISCUSSIONS ON THE MINISTRY

How have WELS and LCMS intersected over the years on this doctrine? Formal discussions between WELS and LCMS representatives on the topic of the ministry have been happening for over 110 years.

The First Round – 1914–1916

96. To me, that statement gives the impression that the confessions are over the Bible. For the same sentiment, see John F. Brug, "Norma Normata Normata?," *WLQ* 101 (2004): 143; and Paul S. Naumann, "The Role of the Lutheran Confessions in Establishing the Teachings of the Church" (paper presented at the Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, September 26–27, 2005), 20–21. It is certainly true that there is something of a hermeneutical circle. Once we study Scripture and find its teachings in harmony with the Lutheran Confessions, we confess allegiance to the confessions, and then the confessions are in our minds as we continue to read the Bible. But the confessions are not over the Bible.

The first meetings were held on August 11–12, 1914, in connection with a convention of the Synodical Conference in Milwaukee—meetings that had some stormy moments according to a later account.⁹⁷ Some minutes from these meetings survive, which show how the basic positions that persist to this day were already laid out at that time:

The Wisconsin men stated that ... the church office (*Gemeindeamt*) or preaching office for the work of the fellowship (*Predigtamt von Gemeinschaftswegen*) is established and instituted by God in every sense as Matthew 28, Mark 16, John 20, 21, 1 Corinthians 11, and many other clear passages teach.... What we mean by pastoral office (*Pfarramt*) today as the form of the local congregation office (*Lokalgemeindeamt*) in which all of its functions are basically in one person, is, as far as the form is concerned, not a divine command valid for all places, times and circumstances.... The St. Louis men declared that the Wauwatosa men denied the divine institution of the pastoral office (*Pfarramt*). The pastoral office (*Pfarramt*) is a divine command in the sense that all congregations of all places, times, and circumstances (even when they consist of only two or three members) are bound to the establishment of the pastoral office (*Pfarramt*).⁹⁸

Follow-up meetings were held on December 20–21, 1916, in Chicago. At these meetings, some theses were agreed upon which were subsequently known as either the Wauwatosa Theses or the Chicago Theses. The crucial ministry thesis states: “The parish pastorate (*Pfarramt*) ... is of divine institution, and its functions are exactly appointed in the Word of God. Hence the establishment of this office is not a matter of the Christian’s option. The external form and arrangement of this office God has left to the wisdom and the liberty of the Christians under the leading of His Spirit.”⁹⁹

Probably each side was able to interpret this wording to fit its own perspective. As Ladner states: “St. Louis could easily understand the theses to say that the *Pfarramt* is the only form of the ministry. By the same token, Wauwatosa could interpret the expression dealing with the ‘external form and arrangement’ of the ministry to reflect their view that Christians have the liberty to arrange the external form of the ministry to best suit the needs of a church in its particular situation.”¹⁰⁰

The Second Round – 1929–1932

97. “J. P. Koehler’s Retrospective,” 20.

98. “The Discussion with the St. Louis Men on the Doctrine of the Ministry,” partial minutes from the August 1914 meeting found in the files of Peter Prange, translated by Paul Prange.

99. “Basic Documents in the Church and Ministry Discussions,” *The Faithful Word* 7, no. 1 (February 1970): 28. The complete wording of the theses is attached as Appendix #1.

100. Jon Ladner, “The Church and Ministry Debate Between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods” (paper presented at a meeting of the St. Croix Conference of the Minnesota District of WELS, June 12, 2001), 14.

A second round of discussions began in 1929, culminating in a meeting on April 16, 1932, at the Thiensville seminary, consisting of the two synod presidents and the St. Louis and Thiensville faculties.¹⁰¹ At this meeting the group reached agreement on a set of theses known as the Thiensville Theses.¹⁰²

E. C. Fredrich's evaluation of these theses is unsurpassed. First, Fredrich admits that "an agreement on four theses has been achieved by substituting for the real bone of contention—the *divine institution* of special forms of church and ministry, namely, the local congregation and its pastor—the more general phrasing of God's *will and order*."¹⁰³ He then asserts: "If the four theses were assumed to be the final word of the subject, the charge of compromise would be in order. If they, on the other hand, represent the maximum agreement attainable on the issue at the 1932 meeting and leave the unresolved issues for subsequent discussions then a more charitable judgment is in order."¹⁰⁴

The Final Years of the Synodical Conference – 1932–1961

In the years after 1932, it became clear that the Thiensville Theses did not end the intersynodical difficulties.¹⁰⁵ As the Synodical Conference was struggling to hold together in the 1940s and 1950s, the doctrine of the ministry was debated by two Synodical Conference committees—first by the "Interim Committee" from 1946–1952, and then by the "Joint Union Committees" from 1957–1960. The discussion in these years was aggravated by the wholehearted acceptance of the military chaplaincy by LCMS during World War II.

According to their report to the 1952 convention of the Synodical Conference, the Interim Committee "made a thorough study of the doctrine of Church and Ministry." But in the end, all the Interim Committee could do was to recommend that the Synodical Conference adopt the Thiensville Theses from 1932, because they "correctly express the Scriptural principle of this doctrine."¹⁰⁶ The convention officially did that, with the recognition that the Thiensville Theses "do not resolve all the difficulties that still exist among us, and that further clarification on the points in question is desirable."¹⁰⁷

101. In 1929, the WELS seminary moved to its new campus at Thiensville. In 1957, when the city of Mequon was incorporated, the seminary's address changed from Thiensville to Mequon.

102. The Thiensville Theses are attached as Appendix #2.

103. E. C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 184.

104. E. C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 184. J. P. Koehler's evaluation in 1932 is less charitable: "The Theses are evidently just an intersynodical *modus vivendi*, a compromise, whether intended so or not, that leaves matters unclear and both sides free to put their own construction on them." See Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 239.

105. For a summary of some of the interactions, see Brug, *The Ministry of the Word*, 417–23.

106. *Proceedings of the Forty-Second Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America*, 1952, 142.

107. *Proceedings of the Forty-Second Convention*, 144.

The Joint Union Committees met eleven times for a total of thirty-two days from January 1957 through May 1960, with church and ministry as one of the assigned topics.¹⁰⁸ Most of the meetings were devoted to other doctrines, however, such as Scripture, the Antichrist, and church fellowship. A start was made on the doctrine of the church, but no synthesis was achieved on church and ministry prior to the breakup of the Synodical Conference. Significantly, the WELS “Theses on the Church and Ministry” were produced for these meetings—the theses that were later adopted by WELS in 1969 as the official doctrinal position of WELS.¹⁰⁹

Current Discussions – 2012–2024

In the twelve annual meetings between ELS, LCMS, and WELS representatives from 2012–2024, the topic of the ministry has been a major agenda topic in eight of them—more than any other topic. Somehow, it seems that we always keep coming back to the ministry, perhaps because the topic is so intertwined with church life across the board. For our in-house purposes, a chart of “points of agreement” and “points of difference” has been produced in order to try to wrap our heads around the issue.

As a WELS participant, I have appreciated how the LCMS leaders have been willing to listen and to try to understand the WELS position. Coming in, I would say that most of them knew little about WELS and its doctrine. What they brought in was laced with caricatures. The meetings have done much to clarify our positions and eliminate caricatures.

The evaluation of how close we are to each other no doubt varies somewhat from one participant to another. As has been regularly reported about these informal meetings, there is no expectation that a reestablishment of fellowship is coming anytime soon, so there is no pressure to find agreement. But everyone knows that the ministry has been a long-standing bone of contention between WELS and LCMS. It is useful for a new generation to see where we are at today.

EVALUATION OF THE WELS/LCMS SITUATION

Much in Common

For the intersynodical meeting on December 9, 2024, I prepared a list of eight points on which WELS and LCMS agree, based on my reading and my participation in the joint meetings for over a decade. With each of the eight points, I was able to include one or more Bible passages.

108. For this part of the story, see Armin W. Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference: Ecumenical Endeavor* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2000), 341–58.

109. WELS, “Theses on the Church and Ministry,” 39–51.

No doubt, the reason that agreement is found on these points is because there are clear Bible verses to support them. The eight points are these:

1. Royal priesthood of all believers. God has entrusted the Word and sacraments to all believers, and every believer has the right, responsibility, and privilege to proclaim the gospel in daily life. (1 Pet 2:9)
2. Public ministry. God wants the means of grace administered publicly by individuals who are specially called. (Eph 4:11–12; Titus 1:5)
3. Training. Individuals who serve in public ministry need to be adequately trained for their service. (1 Tim 3:2, 9–10; 5:22)
4. Divine call. Individuals who serve in public ministry must be called; they must not set themselves up. (Rom 10:14–16)
5. Work. Individuals in the public ministry are called to administer the means of grace publicly on behalf of the Christians who call them. (Matt 28:19–20)
6. Male leaders. It is God’s will that congregations have male overseers. It is contrary to God’s will for women to serve as pastors. (1 Cor 14:34–35; 1 Tim 2:12; 3:2)
7. Public recognition by wider church. It is appropriate for a church body to have standards for its public ministers, and to publicly recognize the individuals who are qualified to serve. For that reason, we have carefully managed rosters of church workers. (1 Tim 3:1–10; 4:14; 5:22)
8. Freedom to establish helping offices. The church has freedom to establish offices of public ministry to help in the church’s mission of sharing the means of grace. (Acts 6:1–6)

If you step back and look at this list, the agreement is quite remarkable, and it covers the fundamental issues. Because there is agreement on these eight points, not surprisingly, the way that the public ministry works itself out in WELS and LCMS is very similar. Both synods have male pastors who shepherd congregations, with other church workers who help in the sharing of the means of grace. Church workers are called by their congregations, with the involvement of ecclesiastical overseers who maintain called worker rosters. Even the roster lists are similar. The type of men included on the pastor roster of LCMS is the same as WELS. Similarly the people on the commissioned minister rosters of LCMS are the same as the teacher and staff minister rosters of WELS.

In my opinion, LCMS is especially strong in articulating the relationship between the royal priesthood and the called ministry—ground that is frequently covered in LCMS publications.¹¹⁰ Of course, Walther had to steer LCMS into a balanced position in this troublesome area in the synod’s earliest days, avoiding the extremes of clergy domination and clergy denigration.

110. One example is Eugene F. A. Klug, *Church and Ministry: The Role of Church, Pastor, and People from Luther to Walther* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 135–252.

However, the called ministry in these LCMS presentations is always limited to the pastoral office. LCMS talks about the relationship between the royal priesthood and *the office of the pastoral ministry*. WELS, on the other hand, likes to talk about the relationship between the royal priesthood and *the public ministry in general*. Here is where we do not speak exactly the same language. We differ on what should be said about the breadth and configuration of the public ministry.

LCMS Says More Than the New Testament on Some Points

For the December 2024 meeting, I also prepared a list of five points on which LCMS says things that WELS is not able to say. With these points, I did not include Bible passages, because it seems to me that LCMS is saying more than the New Testament with these assertions. The five points are these:

1. One divinely instituted concrete office. LCMS says that the pastoral office is the one divinely instituted and mandated “Office of the Public Ministry.” This office always includes all the essential functions of the church’s ministry.
2. This pastoral office is a direct extension of the office held by the apostles. LCMS says that the pastoral office directly continues the preaching and sacramental ministry of the apostles.
3. Ordination required in AC XIV. LCMS says that a public rite of appointment (historically ordination) is required for men in the pastoral office according to the proper understanding of AC XIV.
4. Other church offices have their source in the pastoral office. LCMS says that other church offices—set up by the church without divine mandate—derive from the pastoral office and perform certain of its functions.
5. Tasks that belong exclusively to the pastoral office. LCMS says that there are public ministerial duties that ordinarily must be carried out only by men in the pastoral office. Such duties include administering the Lord’s Supper and announcing the absolution publicly.

In dialogue with LCMS, WELS has always said that we do not see a command in the Bible that there must be one man with the full use of the means of grace who is at the top of every congregation, and that certain ministerial tasks can only be done by him. In the New Testament it seems that congregations may have been overseen by a council of elders, imitating the organizational structure of the typical Jewish synagogue of the time. There are no job descriptions for the elders and the deacons.

Some confessional Lutherans look upon the commissioning passages in Matthew 28, Mark 16, and John 20 as “the dominical institution of the pastoral office.”¹¹¹ Thomas M. Winger, the current president of Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary in St. Catherines, Ontario, Canada, has gone farther, arguing that the entire Gospel of Matthew is “a manual of instruction for the bearers of the office of the ministry.”¹¹² However, C. F. W. Walther,¹¹³ the LCMS *Brief Statement* of 1932,¹¹⁴ and the 2018 CTCR document on *The Royal Priesthood*¹¹⁵ all understand Matt 28:18–20 to be directed to believers in general, and Joel Fredrich gives reasons why that is exegetically preferable.¹¹⁶

Franz Pieper points to Titus 1:5 (“Appoint elders in every town”) as a command for the public ministry as he understands it,¹¹⁷ as do Elmer Moeller¹¹⁸ and Neil Hilton.¹¹⁹ I appreciate these men, since they at least are looking to build their position on the New Testament, and I myself would point to Titus 1:5 as an evidence that God wants public ministers of the gospel. But is there a one-to-one correspondence between the New Testament “elder” and our modern day “pastor?” In 1 Tim 5:17, Paul indicates that there were “elders” who didn’t preach and teach.¹²⁰ How do I know that a Lutheran elementary school principal wouldn’t fit into the New Testament definition of an “elder?” And, if Titus 1:5 is a prescriptive command from God for all people of all generations, shouldn’t we have multiple pastors in each town, rather than one

111. Rolf Preus, “Wisconsin and Missouri: Overcoming Our Differences,” *Christian Culture: A Magazine for Lutherans* 8 (Spring 2023): 21. See also David R. Preus, “The Doctrine of Church and Ministry Today in the LCMS, WELS, and ELS” (paper presented at the Congress on the Lutheran Confessions, Bloomington, MN, April 30, 2014), 4.

112. Thomas M. Winger, “The Office of the Holy Ministry according to the New Testament Mandate of Christ,” *Logia* 7, no. 2 (Eastertide 1998): 42. Needless to say, this is miles apart from Martin Franzmann in *Follow Me: Discipleship According to Saint Matthew* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1961). In his review of Winger’s *Ephesians* commentary, Paul Zell says: “This reviewer is struck by the lengths to which the commentator goes to keep those who are equipped by their pastors from ‘speaking the truth’ of God’s Word themselves.... Winger regards the church as the passive recipient of her pastors’ ministry.” See Paul E. Zell, review of *Concordia Commentary: Ephesians* by Thomas M. Winger, *WLQ* 114 (2017): 70.

113. C. F. W. Walther, *God Grant It: Daily Devotions from C. F. W. Walther*, trans. Gerhard P. Grabenhofer, ed. August Crull (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 101.

114. *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia), 14.

115. CTCR, *The Royal Priesthood: Identity and Mission* (September 2018), 18, 38.

116. Joel Fredrich, “The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry,” 18–19. See also Joel Fredrich et al., “Matthew 28:19 and the Mission of the WELS,” Report of the committee appointed by the Conference of Presidents of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in response to Resolution No. 3 (Clarifying the Mission of the Synod) in the Report of Floor Committee No. 2 of the 2005 Synod Convention, April 23, 2007, 17–18.

117. Franz Pieper, “The Laymen’s Movement in the Light of God’s Word,” in *What is Christianity? and Other Essays* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1933), 111.

118. Elmer J. Moeller, “Concerning the Ministry of the Church,” *CTM* 22 (1951): 399.

119. Neil Hilton, “Church and Ministry: The Public Ministry,” *The Faithful Word* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1969): 26–27.

120. This interpretation is favored by Chemnitz, Gerhard, and Walther. See Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part II, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1978), 683. Johann Gerhard, *On the Ecclesiastical Ministry*, Part One, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2012), 37. Johann Gerhard, *On the Ecclesiastical Ministry*, Part Two, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes and Heath R. Curtis (St. Louis: Concordia, 2012), 46. This last section is quoted approvingly by C. F. W. Walther. See Walther, *The Church & The Office of the Ministry*, 258–59.

(“Appoint elders in every town)? Shouldn’t we call them “elders” rather than “pastors?” Shouldn’t they be appointed by ecclesiastical overseers, rather than elected by the congregation?

I’m fascinated to see what people say about the New Testament deacons. David Scaer says that in the New Testament the deacons were pastors,¹²¹ and Albert Colver likewise asserts that “the terms bishop and deacon” are “interchangeable” at the time of the New Testament epistles.¹²² However, David Webber quotes C. F. W. Walther saying that the deacons of the apostles’ time were “in no way preachers and overseers of souls,” but only “helpers for the functions of the preaching office which do not make up the essence of the office.”¹²³ Andrew Bartelt concurs that the New Testament diaconate was definitely not a Word and sacrament ministry.¹²⁴ But how do we know these things? Maybe these contrasting evaluations are a clue that the New Testament does not really tell us what the job description of the deacons was, and we should leave it undetermined, rather than reading our twenty-first century ministry concerns into the text.

The situation is similar with the New Testament office of “teacher.” Samuel Nafzger says that “teacher” in the New Testament is a synonymous term for the office of the public ministry (= the pastoral ministry).¹²⁵ But Martin Chemnitz¹²⁶ and Johann Gerhard¹²⁷ both understand the term “teachers” in Eph 4:11 to be referring to “catechists” and teachers in schools, who are not the ordinary shepherds of the churches. There is no way to prove that all the New Testament offices coalesce into the pastoral office.

My opinion is that LCMS Lutherans tend to set up their own grid or framework for the public ministry (i.e., there are two categories: 1) full-use, divinely commanded pastors, and 2) limited-use, not divinely commanded helping offices), and then they impose this framework onto the New Testament. So, every ministry title needs to be funneled into one of the two categories. But in reality, the New Testament has a panoply of ministry titles with a studied indifference toward job descriptions. Yes, elders/bishops likely were more comprehensive in oversight responsibilities. But how do I know that a deacon could never preach or baptize or administer the Lord’s Supper, even a private communion for a shut-in?

In short, I don’t think that any of the five contested points can be proved from Scripture. My conclusion is the same as that of John Schaller: “In the attempt to prove by indirect means

121. David P. Scaer, “The Clergy as the New Testament Ministers with a Proposal for Parochial School Teachers,” *Issues in Christian Education* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 7.

122. Albert Colver, “Deacons: Office of Service or Office of the Word?,” *Logia* 16, no. 2 (Easter 2007): 32.

123. David Jay Webber, *Spiritual Fathers* (Phoenix: Klotsche-Little Publishing, 2013), 79.

124. Andrew H. Bartelt, “A Confessional Lutheran Approach to the Diaconate,” *Logia* 10, no. 3 (Holy Trinity 2001): 51.

125. Samuel H. Nafzger, “The Office of the Pastoral Ministry and the Priesthood of All Believers,” *Lutheran Education* 131, no. 1 (September–October 1995): 24.

126. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part II, 683.

127. Gerhard, *On the Ecclesiastical Ministry*, Part Two, 44.

that in the New Testament certain forms of the public ministry [*Predigtienst*] have been ordained by God, sufficient care has not always been taken not to prove *too much* from the Scripture passages that are used.”¹²⁸

LCMS Says More Than the Lutheran Confessions on Some Points

LCMS theologians sometimes assert that their understanding of “the Office of the Holy Ministry”—and not the position of WELS—is in harmony with the Lutheran Confessions. However, I have always felt that the WELS position aligns nicely with the Lutheran Confessions. For the joint ELS/LCMS/WELS leadership meeting in December 2021, I prepared a four-page handout to that effect, which is attached as Appendix #3 to this paper.

One must remember what the chief concerns of the confessors were in regard to the ministry, and then one must not expect the confessions to address and settle other matters. The two main concerns were: 1) *The work of the ministry is to distribute the forgiveness of sins* through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not sacrificial (as in the Roman Catholic Mass) and it does not involve governmental authority (as in the Roman Catholic blending of church and state). 2) *It is legitimate for the Lutheran church to set up the public ministry* and put people into it. Lutheran churches do not need Roman Catholic bishops, nor bishops at all, because bishops do not have any extra spiritual authority by divine law. The right to call people into the public ministry resides in the church through the universal priesthood.

The Lutheran Confessions, therefore, do not elaborate on how the public ministry is to be configured. The confessions do not identify precisely what church workers are included in the ministry, or how the various workers differ one from another. Rather—much like the New Testament—the confessions speak about a variety of church offices, without specifying the particular duties of any of them. The confessions imply that teachers of schools are in the ministry and need to subscribe to Lutheran doctrine along with the pastors. The confessions imply that workers in various offices are to be ordained. For specific references, please check Appendix #3.

Pointedly in regard to LCMS, I see nothing in the confessions in regard to these three propositions, sometimes voiced in LCMS: 1) that there is “one” divinely instituted office of public ministry, which is the pastoral office, 2) that other offices are derived from or are extensions of this one divinely instituted pastoral office, and 3) that the one divinely instituted pastoral office is a direct continuation of the office of apostle. From what I see, being a confessional Lutheran does not require adherence to these three propositions.

128. Schaller, “The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry,” 48.

LCMS Has Its Own Jargon

WELS may legitimately be accused of using some idiosyncratic language in regard to the ministry. We use the word “form(s)” extensively in our ministry writing, and we have a category of public ministers called “staff ministers.” But LCMS also has its own idiosyncratic jargon, and it starts with the now ubiquitous phrase “the Office of the Holy Ministry” (sometimes “the Office of the Public Ministry” or “the Office of the Pastoral Ministry”), used as the moniker for the pastoral ministry.

This expression is novel, I think, because the historic terms in Lutheran theology were simply *ministerium ecclesiasticum*¹²⁹ and *Predigtamt*.¹³⁰ There is no doubling of terms, as found in “the *office* of the *ministry*.”¹³¹ The doubled expression, I fear, skews the understanding in English to automatically suggest one position or concrete form of ministry in a way that the original Latin and German did not. There is a ministry given by God, but there is *just one office or official position* for carrying out this ministry (aka the pastoral office). Why not stick with “the church ministry,” “the ministry of the Word,” or “the public ministry” for these terms?¹³²

A leading LCMS historian, Fort Wayne Professor Roland Ziegler, acknowledges that “the now common term office of the [holy] ministry is neither biblical nor confessional, but became popularized in Theodore Tappert’s translation of AC V.”¹³³ Interestingly, if you look at Tappert’s AC V where the heading is “The Office of the Ministry,” there is a footnote that states: “This title would be misleading if it were not observed (as the text of the article makes clear) that the Reformers thought of ‘the office of the ministry’ in other than clerical terms.”¹³⁴ Unfortunately, I suspect that most LCMS readers *do* think “in clerical terms” with the expression (i.e., “the office of the ministry” = the pastoral office).

The recent LCMS shift toward this term can be seen even in how the title of Walther’s classic *Kirche und Amt* has been published over the years. The 1962 title translated by J. T. Mueller was *Church and Ministry*.¹³⁵ The 2012 title revised by Matthew Harrison was *The Church & The Office of The Ministry*.¹³⁶

129. See *Joh. Guilielmi Baieri Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, Vol. III, 683.

130. Roland Ziegler, “Priesthood and Office,” *Logia* 28, no. 1 (Epiphany 2019): 25.

131. According to my notes, Siegbert Becker remarked that “office of the ministry” is a “bit tautological.”

132. I note with interest that the following sources use “the public ministry” as their default expression: Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), 3:437–62; and John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955), 563–84. The shift to “the office of the ministry” came after this.

133. Roland Ziegler, “Priesthood and Office,” 25.

134. *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 31. Likewise, the Göttingen edition has this footnote: “Luther verstand das Predigtamt nicht klerikal.” See *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952), 58.

135. C. F. W. Walther, *Church and Ministry (Kirche und Amt)*, trans. J. T. Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia, 1987).

136. C. F. W. Walther, *The Church & The Office of the Ministry*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia, 2012).

In a similar vein, sometimes the word *Predigtamt* in recent LCMS materials is translated “preaching office.”¹³⁷ The 2005 LCMS edition of the Lutheran Confessions states in connection with AC V: “The German version of the Augsburg Confession uses a very concrete expression to describe this office of pastoral ministry: ‘preaching office’ (*Predigtamt*).”¹³⁸ This translation suffers from the same problem. Brug remarks that it is not a good translation, because “the English ‘preaching office’ almost always means ‘pastor.’ The German *Predigtamt* does not.”¹³⁹

Finally, unique to LCMS is the use of “auxiliary office” for all offices of public ministry apart from the pastoral office. Speaking of these other church offices, we have asked our LCMS dialogue partners if such church workers are in the public ministry. In response, we have heard leaders say that commissioned ministers are “in public ministry”—because they are serving with the Word in an official capacity—but they are not “in *the* public ministry” or “in *the office of the* public ministry”—because those terms are reserved for pastors. In response, I have urged LCMS leaders to recognize that they have jargon that is not the language of historic Lutheranism.¹⁴⁰

Since its beginning, LCMS arguably has had a less than ideal way of speaking about church workers in positions other than the pastoral office. Often such workers are ignored in doctrinal writing about the public ministry;¹⁴¹ otherwise they are seemingly in limbo—not really in the public ministry, but not laypeople either. One LCMS educator has written: “Walther’s confusing contradictions in words and actions concerning the role of Lutheran teachers remain as his unsettled legacy in the Missouri Synod.”¹⁴²

Is This a Difference in Doctrine?

The million dollar question is: Are these differences divisive of fellowship? The answer is something we all need to wrestle with.

In the 1800s, differences on church and ministry were considered divisive by many confessional Lutherans. Wilhelm Loehe wanted to consider the differences about ordination between himself and C. F. W. Walther, and between Johannes Grabau and Walther, as non-divisive. In his opinion, Lutherans had struggled with these matters ever since Luther and

137. This is another subtle translation shift in the 2012 edition of Walther’s *Kirche und Amt*, in comparison with the 1987 edition. The default for *Predigtamt* is “preaching office,” instead of “ministry” or “ministry of the Word.”

138. McCain, 59.

139. Brug, *The Ministry of the Word*, 32.

140. A recent senior thesis at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary looked at the ministry doctrine of Calov and Quenstedt and argued that there is nothing that would be unacceptable in WELS. Rather, these dogmaticians from the silver age of orthodoxy “would not have agreed wholeheartedly with the Missouri view of the ministry.” See Robert R. Read, “The Voice of Our Fathers on the Controversy of the Ministry: The Writings of Abraham Calov and Johann Andreas Quenstedt” (MDiv thesis, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, February 16, 2024), 52.

141. For example, see Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:437–62.

142. Mary Hilgendorf, “The Role of the Lutheran Teacher: C. F. W. Walther’s Unsettled Legacy in Lutheran Education, Part Three,” *Lutheran Education* 135, no. 3 (January/February 2000): 149.

Melanchthon without dissolving church fellowship. But Walther considered the position of LCMS on church and ministry to be settled doctrine, established by Scripture and the confessions, and not able to be compromised.¹⁴³ Friedrich Brunn, one of the founders of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Saxony (the sister synod of WELS in Germany), broke fellowship with the Breslau Synod in 1865 and the Immanuel Synod in 1870 in large part because of their teachings on church and ministry.¹⁴⁴

When differences arose between WELS and LCMS, however, the original WELS participants did not think that the differences were divisive. J. P. Koehler recognized a difference “in the method of interpretation” between the linguistic-historical study of Scripture and the presentation of preconceived dogmatic notions. Still, “the disagreement was not such that the opponents accused each other of false doctrine.”¹⁴⁵ In 1929 August Pieper stated: “The dispute has thus far not been able to destroy the unity of the spirit between us.”¹⁴⁶

In the later Synodical Conference discussions, WELS leaders made similar statements. In a 1947 *Northwestern Lutheran* article, WLS Seminary President Edmund Reim wrote: “We grant that marked differences of opinion have been expressed in discussions of this doctrine of the ministry and the Church.... We maintain that there is no difference in the doctrine. Whatever difference there may be is confined to application of the doctrine.”¹⁴⁷ Similarly, in his Interim Committee “Minority Report” at the 1949 convention of the Synodical Conference, WELS Representative Harold H. Eckert stated about the differences on church and ministry that they “are not differences in doctrine as such.... They are differences in application.”¹⁴⁸

Still, Armin Schuetze in a 1988 article was more guarded. He wrote:

Upon closer examination, however, more is involved than a difference in application or in the use of words. The significant factor is that the LCMS position claims that the specific *congregational* grouping has a special divine mandate and that the *pastoral office* has a special divine institution in contrast to all other forms of the church or ministry.... But there is no word of institution in the New Testament for such specific forms.... The Missouri position fails to recognize the full liberty that the church has under God.... It

143. Peter M. Prange, *Wielding the Sword of the Spirit, Volume One: The Doctrine & Practice of Church Fellowship in the Missouri Synod (1838–1867)* (Wauwatosa, WI: Joh. Ph. Koehler Press, 2021) 194–200. See also John Wohlrabe, *An Historical Analysis of the Doctrine of the Ministry*, 43, 72.

144. Richard Drews, “The Relation of Friedrich Brunn to the German Free Churches and the Missouri Synod, 1846–1876” (STM thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1962), 64–77.

145. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 238. Similarly, in his 1932 article on the *Amtslehre*, Koehler wrote: “The faculty was fully aware that no practical difference existed between the two contending parties in the essential conceptions.... One mustn’t be so quick on the trigger with the charge of false doctrine.” See Koehler, “The Doctrine Pertaining to the Office of the Ministry,” 8.

146. August Pieper, “Concerning the Doctrine of the Church and of Its Ministry,” 86.

147. Edmund Reim, “The Debate on Union: Doctrinal Differences in The Synodical Conference?” *NL* 34, no. 16 (August 3, 1947): 245.

148. *Proceedings of the Fortieth Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America*, 1949, 140–41.

recognizes what in effect must be considered ceremonial laws for the New Testament church.¹⁴⁹

When I have seen accusations of false teaching on the ministry in recent decades, they generally come from LCMS-oriented theologians who speak critically of the WELS position. Church historians know that the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation (LCR) consider the difference to be doctrinally divisive. The doctrine of church and ministry is the main reason why this LCMS splinter church never joined WELS.¹⁵⁰ Recent LCMS writers who imply that WELS holds to doctrinal error on the ministry include the following: Todd Peperkorn,¹⁵¹ Samuel Nafzger,¹⁵² and David Rueter.¹⁵³ Close to home for me is a comment that appeared in *Logia* as a response to my article on “The Revised *This We Believe* of the WELS on the Ministry.”¹⁵⁴ Andrew Steinmann wrote: “Nass’s view of the ministry does not place him in the mainstream of Lutheran teaching, but requires a tortured reading of the Scriptures and the Confessions.”¹⁵⁵

That being said, the LCMS leaders with whom we have been meeting over the past twelve years have not made such accusations. Though we have struggled to understand each other and we recognize our different emphases, both synods insist that well-trained, publicly ratified male leaders are needed for congregations and that there can be a variety of other offices in the church. At the 2024 Reformation Lectures at Bethany Lutheran College, LCMS President Matthew Harrison expressed his opinion that the doctrine of the ministry does not need to be a barrier between WELS/ELS and LCMS.¹⁵⁶

For myself, I could live with Lutheran churches configuring and speaking about the public ministry in different ways, as long as the doctrinal principles about qualifications, the

149. Armin W. Schuetze, “The WELS and the LCMS—Where Are We Now?” *WLQ* 85 (1988): 279. In this article, Schuetze also speaks about the claim that the local congregation is the only divinely instituted form of the church. Remarkably, in our current discussions with LCMS leaders, we have come to understand that LCMS no longer holds to this teaching. The current LCMS leaders have been very comfortable asserting that synod is church. We seem to be united on the church, but not the ministry.

150. See Neil Hilton, “Church and Ministry: The Public Ministry,” *The Faithful Word* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1969): 28. Also Kenneth K. Miller, “The Difference between the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation” (Fort Wayne, IN, 1971). Brug notes that when the LCR declared that it was not in fellowship with WELS in 1970, “it was the first time that the ongoing differences concerning church and ministry were made divisive between churches of the old Synodical Conference.” See John F. Brug, *WELS & Other Lutherans*, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2009), 213.

151. Todd A. Peperkorn, “How Two Missouri Synod Leaders Handled False Doctrine and Dissent in the Twentieth Century: Francis Pieper and John Behnken” (paper presented at the “Confession and Christ’s Mission” conference, Melrose Park, IL, October 22, 2004), 14.

152. Samuel H. Nafzger, ed., *Confessing the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Systematic Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2017), 2:1015.

153. Rueter, *Called to Serve: A Theology of Commissioned Ministry*, 69, 78, 82–83.

154. Thomas P. Nass, “The Revised *This We Believe* of the WELS on the Ministry,” *Logia* 10, no. 3 (Holy Trinity 2001): 31–41

155. Andrew E. Steinmann, “Colloquium Fratrum: Responses to Thomas Nass,” *Logia* 11, no. 1 (Epiphany 2002): 46.

156. His words were: “I think we probably have come to the point, most of us, to say that the church and Office of the Ministry issues should not divide, or should not ultimately divide.” See Matthew Harrison, “The LCMS Perspective,” *LSQ* 65 (2025): 27.

divine call, the work of the ministry, and male headship are all maintained. We allow Lutheran churches to set up church governance in different ways—with bishops, church councils, or voters' meetings. Why not the public ministry? It could be possible for two groups to share the same basic doctrine, but have different ways of arriving at it, articulating it, and applying it. However, if people assert that their particular public ministry arrangement is demanded by God and tell me that I have to do it the same way, then we have a problem. Then we have false doctrine.

This is how I think about it whenever Christians, in my opinion, say more than the New Testament on a matter of church practice. There are people who say that Lord's Supper should be celebrated every Sunday, and that the *reliquiae* should be consumed. In cases like these, if such people do not bind me to their scruples—if they do not accuse me of false teaching for teaching differently—I can coexist with them in matters of practical church life. Although I am concerned about people adding to the Word of God (Rev 22:18), I can respect God-fearing people who are seriously trying to follow their consciences in the application of God's Word. But they must not accuse me of false doctrine, if I don't follow them on a matter not clearly taught in the New Testament. In short, I am eager to hear how people respond to my position, which says a lot about the nature of the difference.

Though not the case with the current LCMS discussion participants, I do fear that a good number of LCMS pastors would be inclined to speak harshly about the WELS position on the ministry. Whether or not this is true may become more apparent in the coming years.

More Widespread Interaction with LCMS in the Future?

As I speak, plans are being laid for some free conferences for clergy and laypeople from the synods of the former Synodical Conference, starting in 2026. Maybe some of you will be rubbing shoulders with LCMS people in the future more than in the past. Synodical leaders like myself who have benefited from face-to-face intersynodical interaction feel that it is a good time for such interaction to happen more broadly, also at the local level.

If so, you may find that you have a lot in common with your LCMS neighbors—like long-lost cousins. But I can warn you: Be prepared at some point to talk about the ministry! This is a never-ending conversation item. You have inherited it from your predecessors as I did, and you will need to take your turn in trying to understand it and solve it with your LCMS neighbors.

Don't be surprised if your LCMS neighbors imagine that you have a low view of the pastoral office, as something not really distinguished from the priesthood of believers. Maybe you would like to ask them where in the New Testament they see a special institution of the pastoral ministry in contrast to other forms of ministry. Maybe you would like to ask them how they imagine absolution to work when spoken by pastors and others.

But also, don't be blind to the blessings that Christ brings through the public ministry in both synods.

THROUGH THE PUBLIC MINISTRY CHRIST BLESSES HIS CHURCH

Don't Be Blind to God's Blessings

For the last thirty years, I have been a pew-sitter on Sunday mornings for the most part. To know, week by week, that there will be men who will present Jesus to me in a careful way through Word and sacrament—this is a sublime and grand blessing from God. The three pastors who currently preach to me have remarkably different styles with different strengths. But every week I worship in an orderly way with other Christians. Every week I hear the gospel.

Certainly, among the myriad of blessings from God that we take for granted—like the ability to see and hear and walk and talk—is the blessing of the public ministry. What if we didn't have any spiritual role models or spiritual guidance? What if there was no one to visit us when we are on our death beds? What if there were no Christian teachers to teach our children?

Especially when we become consumed in a doctrinal debate, we can become blind to the blessings received through the doctrine. When we are arguing about the best English Bible translation, we can forget what a blessing it is just to have so many translations in English. When we are pulling our hair out trying to understand what LCMS says on the ministry and how it differs from WELS, we should pause and thank God that he has set up the public ministry in the first place. Christ sends public ministers to feed us spiritually. How wonderful is that!

The Blessings of the WELS Public Ministry Doctrine

In addition, we can thank God for the way the doctrine of the public ministry has been confessed and practiced in WELS. Writing in 1993, E. C. Fredrich stated: “For four score years the church-ministry position achieved in the Federation years by the Wauwatosa men has been a source of strength and blessing for our Wisconsin Synod.... The Bible-based doctrine, bequeathed us by the fathers in the Federation, is still serving us well.”¹⁵⁷ Has it been “a source of strength and blessing?” Is it “still serving us well?”

I think so. I happen to live in the community which probably has the highest concentration of WELS public ministers in the world. By my count, New Ulm, Minnesota (population 14,120 in the 2020 census), has 124 full-time called ministers of the gospel in a wide variety of offices—five parish pastors, twenty-three pastors teaching at the high school or college level, one staff minister, fifty male teachers teaching at the grade school, high school, or college

157. Edward C. Fredrich II, “Doctrinal Concerns of the Federation,” *WHIJ* 11, no. 2 (April 1993): 9.

level, and forty-four female teachers teaching at the pre-school, grade school, high school, or college level. It is the WELS doctrine of the public ministry in full bloom!

Of course, New Ulm is not a utopia; sin is still at work. But to see this diverse public ministry in action is a wonderful thing. Dedicated Christians work side-by-side for the Lord and the good of his church with the understanding that they are colleagues in the one ministry of the gospel, while at the same time they understand that they have different roles granted through the call of Christ's church. Each in their own lane, all on the same highway. I can see that our doctrine is a source of blessing, and it is serving us well.

Yes, through the public ministry, Christ blesses the church. Through the way the doctrine of the ministry has been taught in WELS, Christ blesses our church.

APPENDIX #1

The Wauwatosa Theses

Adopted by representatives of the Wauwatosa and St. Louis Seminaries
December 20–21, 1916

Found in *The Faithful Word*, 7, no. 1 (February 1970): 27–28.

1. The Church in the intrinsic sense of the term is the sum total of all those who have come to faith in Christ through the Gospel.
2. Local congregations are organizations of Christians who, conforming to the will of God, according to locality and circumstances, have associated themselves for the public administration of the Means of Grace and for joint work in the Kingdom of God. They are associations formed according to the will of God. An occasional and casual meeting of Christians, also in the name of Jesus, is no local congregation in this sense.
3. The parish pastorate (Pfarramt) is the ministry delegated (uebertragen) by the congregation to persons with the required aptitudes in order to exercise the rights of the spiritual priesthood of all Christians on behalf of the congregation (von Gemeinschaftswegen).
4. The office is of divine institution, and its functions are exactly appointed in the Word of God. Hence the establishment of this office is not a matter of the Christians' option. The external form and arrangement of this office God has left to the wisdom and the liberty of the Christians under the leading of His Spirit.

German Version of the Wauwatosa Theses

From the Seminary Library, Mequon
Papers of Joh. P. Meyer

1. Die Kirche im eigentlichen Sinn ist die Gesamtheit aller derer, die durch das Evangelium zum Glauben an Christum gekommen sind.
2. Ortsgemeinden sind Verbindungen von Christen, die sich dem Willen Gottes gemaess, nach Ort und Umstaenden zur oeffentlichen Handhabung der Gnadenmittel und zu gemeinsamer Arbeit am Reiche Gottes zusammengeschlossen haben. Sie sind von Gott gewollte Verbindungen. Gelegentliches und zufaelliges Beisammensein von Christen, auch im Namen Jesu, ist keine Ortsgemeinde in diesem Sinne.
3. Das Pfarramt ist der von der Gemeinde dazu tuechtigen Personen uebertragene Dienst, die Rechte des geistlichen Priestertums aller Christen von gemeinschaftswegen auszuueben.
4. Dies Amt ist goettlicher Ordnung, und seine Funktionen sind in Gottes Wort genau bestimmt. Die Aufrichtung dieses Amtes steht daher nicht in dem Belieben der Christen. Die aeussere Form und Einrichtung dieses Amtes hat Gott der Weisheit und Freiheit der Christen under der Leitung seines Geistes ueberlassen.

APPENDIX #2

The Thiensville Theses

Adopted by representatives of the Thiensville and St. Louis Seminaries
April 16, 1932

Found in the *Proceedings of the Synodical Conference*, 1952, 143.

A different translation can be found in *The Faithful Word*, 7, no. 2 (May 1970).

Statements adopted by the faculty of the Thiensville Seminary and representatives of the faculty of the St. Louis Seminary and the Presidents of the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods at Thiensville, Wis., April 16, 1932.

I. As we know from Scripture, it is God's will and regulation that Christians who reside in the same area also establish an external connection in order to exercise jointly the obligations of their spiritual priesthood.

II. As we know from Scripture, it is furthermore God's will and regulation that such Christian local congregations have shepherds and teachers, who in the name and on behalf of the congregation carry out the duties of the ministry of the Word in their midst.

III. As we know from Scripture, it is also God's will and regulation that Christian local congregations give expression to their unity of faith with other congregations and carry on jointly with them the work of the Kingdom of God, as is done among us in the unprecribed form of a Synod.

IV. Because every Christian possesses the keys of the kingdom of heaven, every judgment pronounced in agreement with God's Word by an individual Christian or by more Christians in any kind of combination, is valid also in heaven. But, as we know from Scripture, it is God's will and regulation that proceedings against a brother who has sinned shall not be considered completed until his local congregation has acted. Congregational discipline and synodical discipline, if everything is done properly, cannot cause a conflict, since the local congregation excludes from the local congregation and not from the Synod, and Synod excludes from Synod and not from the local congregation.

Note. — In accordance with ecclesiastical usage we call the exclusion executed by a congregation excommunication (ban).

German Version of the Thiensville Theses

Found in the *Proceedings of the Synodical Conference*, 1952, 142–43.

Sätze angenommen am 16. April 1932 in Thiensville, Wis., von der Fakultät des dortigen Seminars und Vertretern der St. Louiser Fakultät und den Präsidien der Synoden von Wisconsin und Missouri.

1. Es ist Gottes Wille und Ordnung, wie wir aus der Heiligen Schrift erkennen, daß Christen, die zusammen wohnen, auch äußerlich in Verbindung treten, um gemeinschaftlich die Pflichten ihres geistlichen Priestertums auszuüben.
2. Es ist, wie wir aus der Heiligen Schrift erkennen, ferner Gottes Wille und Ordnung, daß solche christliche Ortsgemeinden Hirten und Lehrer haben, die von Gemeinschaft wegen das Amt des Wortes in ihrer Mitte ausrichten.
3. Es ist auch Gottes Wille und Ordnung, wie wir aus der Heiligen Schrift erkennen, daß christliche Ortsgemeinden ihre Glaubenseinigkeit mit andern Gemeinden zum Ausdruck bringen und die Reichgottesarbeit auch außerhalb ihres eignen Kreises mit ihnen gemeinschaftlich verrichten, etwa wie das bei uns in der freien Form der Synode geschieht.
4. Weil jeder Christ die Schlüssel des Himmelreichs besitzt, so gilt ein von einem einzelnen oder auch mehreren Christen in irgendwelcher Zusammensetzung nach Gottes Wort ausgesprochenes Urteil auch im Himmel. Doch ist es, wie wir aus der Heiligen Schrift erkennen, Gottes Wille und Ordnung, daß ein Vorgehen gegen einen sündigenden Bruder nicht als zum Abschluß gekommen angesehen werde, bis seine Ortsgemeinde gehandelt hat. Die Zucht der Lokalgemeinde und die Synodalzucht können, wenn es recht zugeht, nicht in Konflikt miteinander geraten, weil die Lokalgemeinde von der Lokalgemeinde und nicht von der Synode, und die Synode von der Synode und nicht von der Lokalgemeinde ausschließt.

Anmerkung. Den von der Ortsgemeinde vollzogenen Ausschluß nennen wir kirchlichem Sprachgebrauch gemäß Bann.

APPENDIX #3

Some Observations about the Lutheran Confessions In Regard to Our LCMS–WELS Discussion on the Ministry

Presented by T. Nass on December 7, 2011
At the ELS/LCMS/WELS Meeting

1) The Lutheran Confessions can use the terms *ministerium* and *Predigtamt* for the sharing of the means of grace in general, and not just for the public ministry or the pastoral office.¹⁵⁸

AC XXVIII 8 – Latin: These things [eternal righteousness, the Holy Spirit, eternal life] cannot come about except through the ministry of Word and sacraments, as Paul says [Rom. 1:16]: “The gospel ... is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.” (Kolb-Wengert)

Haec non possunt contingere nisi per ministerium Verbi et sacramentorum, sicut Paulus dicit Rom. 1, 16: *Evangelium est potentia Dei ad salute omni credenti.*

Ap VII 20 – German: These same churches [all around the world] have these external marks: the ministry or gospel and the sacraments. (my translation)

Dieselbe Kirche habe diese äußerlichen Zeichen: Das Predigtamt oder Evangelium und die Sakramente.

2) The Lutheran Confessions speak about a variety of offices in the ministry of the church.

Preface 14/16 – Some of us have had this book [the FC] read aloud to each and every theologian and minister of church or school in our lands and territories.... For this reason this Christian accord [the FC] is called and also is the unanimous and concordant confession not only of a few of our theologians but generally of each and every one of our ministers of church and school in our lands and territories. (Kolb-Wengert)

Darauf unter uns etliche ... dasselbe ferner allen und jeden unserer Lande und Gebiete Theologen, Kirchen- und Schuldienern von Artikel zu Artikel vorlesen.... Derwegen denn auch dieselbe christliche Vergleichung nicht allen etlicher wenig unserer Theologen, sondern insgesamt aller und jeder unserer Kirchen- und Schuldiener in unseren Landen und Gebieten enmütiges und einhelliges Bekenntnis heißt und ist.

158. The recent Concordia publication *Office and Ordination in Luther and Melancthon* by Hellmut Lieberg argues that *ministerium* in the Lutheran Confessions and in Melancthon always refers to “the concrete office preaching office” and not just to “a universal ministerial function.” He argues this particularly for AC V, in contrast to Maurer and others. See Lieberg, *Office and Ordination in Luther and Melancthon*, 241–49.

Ap XIII 12 – Latin: For the church has the mandate to appoint ministers. (Kolb-Wengert)
 German: For the church has God’s command that it should appoint preachers and deacons. (my translation)

Latin: Habet enim ecclesia mandatum de constituendis ministris.

German: Denn die Kirche hat Gottes Befehl, daß sie soll Prediger und Diakonos bestellen.

Ap XV 41 – Latin: In our circles the pastors and ministers of the churches are required to instruct and examine the youth publicly. (Tappert)

Latin: Apud nos coguntur pastores et ministri ecclesiarum publice instituere et audire pueritiam.

German: Bei uns werden die Canones gehalten, daß die Pfarrer und Kirchendiener¹⁵⁹ öffentlich und daheim die Kinder und Jugend in Gottes Wort unterwiesen.

Tr 26 – Latin: The ministry of the New Testament ... exists wherever God gives God’s gifts: apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers.¹⁶⁰ (Kolb-Wengert; German adds “and so forth”)

Latin: Ministerium novi testament ... ibi est, ubi Deus dat dona sua, apostolos, prophetas, pastores, doctores.

German: Nun ist je das Predigtamt ... an dem Ort, da Gott seine Gaben gibt: Apostel, Propheten, Hirten, Lehrer, usw.¹⁶¹

159. About the word *Kirchendiener*, Nispel says: “*Kirchendiener* is a very general, broad, and abstract term often used to refer to all the offices and workers in the church together. I have used ‘church worker’ or ‘one who serves in the church’ here, as it includes both those traditionally ordained and those who are not.” See Mark D. Nispel, “Translator’s Introduction” to “*Pfarramt, Geography, and the Order of the Church: A Formal Opinion from Wittenberg*,” *CTQ* 81 (2017): 243.

160. Of course this is an allusion to Eph 4:11. Chemnitz considers these “teachers” to be a rank in the public ministry different from the pastors. See *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part II, 684: In Eph. 4:11 the following ranks of ministers are listed: (1) apostles, ... ; (2) prophets, ... ; (3) evangelists, ... ; (4) pastors, who were placed over a certain flock, as Peter shows (1 Peter 5:2–3), and who not only taught but administered the sacraments and had the oversight over their hearers, as Ezekiel (34:2ff.) describes the pastoral office; (5) teachers, to whom the chief governance or oversight of the church was not entrusted but who only set the doctrine before the people in a simple manner, such as the catechists were later; thus Paul (Rom. 2:20) speaks of “a teacher of children,” and the word “teach” is expressly used in this sense in Heb. 5:12. All these ranks the apostles include under the terms “presbytery” and “episcopacy.”

161. About schoolteachers in early Lutheranism, C. A. T. Selle wrote: “In the Lutheran Church of the 16th century and thereafter the schoolteacher was classified as belonging to the so-called clergy, insofar as he taught the children God’s Word and performed ecclesiastical functions and thus exercised a branch of the public ministry.” This quote is from “Das Amt des Pastors als Schulaufseher” in *Evang.-Luth. Schulblatt* 4 (January 1869). The English translation is from A. C. Mueller, *The Ministry of the Lutheran Teacher*, 109. The church order for the city of Wittenberg in 1533 lists the following “Kirchendiener”: “pfarrer, drei diacon in der stat, ein dorf-caplan, ein schulmeister der lateinischen schule, drei coadjuvanten derselben schule, junkfrau schulmeister, custer gehulf in der junkfrauen schul.” See E. Sehling, *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts* (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1979 reprint), KKO Vol. 1, 700.

Tr 65 – German: It is without doubt, if a pastor in his own church ordains certain suitable persons to the church ministries [plural!], that such ordination is, according to divine law, effective and right. (my translation, leaning on *Triglot*)

Ist's ohne Zweifel, wenn ein Pfarrherr in seiner Kirche etliche tüchtige Personen zu den Kirchenämtern ordnet, daß solche *ordinatio* nach göttlichen Rechten kräftig und recht ist.¹⁶²

Tr 72 – German: If the bishops either are heretics or will not ordain suitable persons, the churches are duty bound before God, according to divine law, to ordain for themselves pastors and church workers. (my translation, leaning on *Triglot*)

Wenn die Bischöfe entweder Ketzler sind oder tüchtige Personen nicht wollen ordinieren, sind die Kirchen vor Gott nach göttlichem Recht schuldig, ihnen selbst Pfarrherren und Kirchendiener zu ordinieren.¹⁶³

162. For an interesting study of early Lutheran ordination rites, see Ralph F. Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites in the Early Reformation Church* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996). Here are some quotes from a book review by Thomas Nass in *WLQ* 103 (2006): 239.

Smith shows that the earliest Lutherans were not hung up on specific forms of public ministry. Without a doubt the earliest Lutherans allowed for forms of public ministry other than the pastoral office.

In the rites of Luther and Bugenhagen, for example, the ordination of deacons, presbyters, and bishops was carried out according to the same liturgical form. The reformers considered the office of presbyter and bishop to be essentially the same, of course. But deacons were recognized by everyone to be a lower order, sometimes predominantly involved with the physical concerns of the congregation. The deacons, however, were considered part of the public ministry of the church and were ordained into their offices.

There are more examples from more locations. The Hesse church orders from 1539 and 1566 had a four-fold distinction of ordained ministry: superintendent, preacher, elder, and deacon. The 1559 rite from Württemberg used one rite for installing or ordaining pastors, preachers, deacons, and subdeacons. The 1569 rite from Wolfenbüttel had one rite for pastors and deacons. The same was true for the 1580 rite from Albertine Saxony.

In summary, Smith speaks about the “fluid way in which the various offices come and go as one moves from territory to territory” (p. 3). He says that “one of the most confusing elements of Reformation history” in regard to the ministry is “the inability to decide what constituted essential offices for the church’s life” (p. 208).

163. Luther also spoke of a wide variety of offices in the public ministry. See *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* from 1528, *LW* 37:364.

All who are engaged in the clerical office or ministry of the Word are in a holy, proper, good, and God-pleasing order and estate, such as those who preach, administer sacraments, supervise the common chest, sextons and messengers or servants who serve such persons.

Also see *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* from 1530, *LW* 46:220–21.

The estate I am thinking of is rather one which has the office of preaching and the service of the word and sacraments and which imparts the Spirit and salvation, blessings that cannot be attained by any amount of pomp and pageantry. It includes the work of pastors, teachers, preachers, lectors, priests (whom men call chaplains, sacristans), schoolmasters, and whatever other work belongs to these offices and persons. This estate the Scriptures highly exalt and praise.

3) When speaking about the public ministry, the Lutheran Confessions sometimes connect it with the ministry of the seventy-two—a ministry not directly connected to the apostles.

Ap VII 47–48 – The ministers act in the place of Christ. ... This accords with that passage [Luke 10:16], “Whoever listens to you listens to me.” (Kolb-Wengert)

Ministri funguntur vice Christi, ... iuxta illud Luc. 10, 16: *Qui vos audit, me audit.*

See also AC XXVIII 22; and Ap VII 28.

4) The chief concerns of the Lutheran Confessions in regard to the ministry are:

- The work of the ministry is to distribute the forgiveness of sins through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not sacrificial (as in the Roman Catholic Mass) and it does not involve governmental authority (as in the Roman Catholic blending of church and state).
- To set up and put people into the public ministry, Lutheran churches do not need Roman Catholic bishops, nor bishops at all, because bishops do not have any extra spiritual authority by divine law. The right to call people into the public ministry resides in the church through the universal priesthood.

5) Issues that are not addressed in the Lutheran Confessions include:

- The breadth of the public ministry (i.e., which church workers are included in it and which are not)
- The specific tasks of the various church offices (i.e., there are no job descriptions for the various church offices)

6) Current LCMS emphases that I do not see in the Lutheran Confessions include:

- That there is “one” divinely instituted office of public ministry, which is the pastoral office.
- That other offices are derived from or are extensions of this one divinely instituted pastoral office.
- That the one divinely instituted pastoral office is a direct continuation of the office of apostle.¹⁶⁴

164. Granted, the German (not the Latin) of Tr 10 says: “We have a sure teaching that the ministry of the Word [*Predigtamt*] proceeds from the general call of the apostles” (my translation). But remember that the word *Predigtamt* in the Treatise is broader than the pastoral ministry; it is the public ministry in general. And notice the context of Tr 10, which makes the point that public ministers do not need the confirmation of the pope as the successor of Peter. Their authority comes from the Word of Christ as given to all of the apostles. See Brug, *The Ministry of the Word*, 313–15.

APPENDIX #4

C. F. W. Walther on the Ministry – WELS and LCMS

A fascinating, and at the same time frustrating, irony is the fact that both WELS and LCMS imagine that they are continuing the legacy of C. F. W. Walther on the ministry. Both sides praise Walther's 1851 monumental work, *Kirche und Amt*, and say that they agree with it.

Here is where the linguistic challenges come in. The key term occurring in all ten of Walther's theses on the ministry is "*das Predigtamt*"—a term notorious for its ambiguity. *Predigtamt* can refer to the sharing of the means of grace in general, it can be used for what we would call the public ministry of the Word in general, and it can be used for the pastoral office.

In Walther's ten theses, LCMS theologians assume that *Predigtamt* is referring to the pastoral office, so everything Walther says refers specifically to that one form of ministry. Therefore, the pastoral office is the one divinely instituted office, which alone is authorized to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments, and which is higher than all other church offices.

WELS theologians assume that *Predigtamt* is referring to the public ministry in general, which is authorized to share the means of grace publicly and which is higher than other offices that are not called to share the Word of God. When Walther adds *Pfarramt* in Theses 1 and 2, he is bringing in the primary and most basic form of the public ministry as an example, using the pastoral ministry (*Pfarramt*) as a species to illustrate the broader genus (*Predigtamt*).¹⁶⁵

Of course, there is much that can be said here. WELS apologists start by pointing out that in connection with Thesis 2—where *Predigtamt* and *Pfarramt* are side by side—Walther has a Luther quote which states that the *Predigtamt* and the ministry of the Word and sacraments (*Dienst des Worts und der Sacramente*) include "pastors, teachers, preachers, readers, priests (as we call the chaplains), sacristans, schoolteachers, and whoever else belongs to such offices and personnel."¹⁶⁶ Why would this quote be included if Walther had in mind that the *Predigtamt* was only the pastor? Likewise, under Thesis 8 Walther inserts a lengthy quote from Chemnitz, in which Chemnitz includes in the ministerium of the church both evangelists who were not

165. Carl Lawrenz, "An Evaluation of Walther's Theses on the Church and Its Ministry," *WLQ* 79 (1982): 127, 134.

166. Walther, *The Church & The Office of The Ministry*, 171. The Luther quote is from *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (1530), *LW* 46:220. This Luther quote was obviously important to Walther. He also included it at the crucial spot in his edition of Baier's *Compendium*. See *Joh. Guilielmi Baieri Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, Vol. III (St. Louis: Concordia, 1879), 688. For a translation of the *Compendium*'s section on the ministry, see "The Church's Ministry," trans. Benjamin P. Schaefer, *WLQ* 107 (2010): 33–63.

appointed to any definite church, and teachers who simply “instructed the people in doctrine, as the catechists did later.”¹⁶⁷

Other Walther writings also indicate that he did not equate the divinely instituted public ministry with the pastoral office. In his sermon at the installation of two college professors, he assured them that there were not leaving the public ministry, but that they would still be in “God’s office.”¹⁶⁸

No doubt, Walther could have helped future generations if he had written more clearly about church offices. But he was charting new ground in America, and he had his hands full reacting to Grabau and Loehe. Over against the exaggerated notions of the pastoral office promoted by these men, he did a fine job of balancing the priesthood of all believers with the called public ministry. We can’t expect him to be the arbiter in our later squabbles.

167. Walther, *The Church & The Office of The Ministry*, 294.

168. C. F. W. Walther, “Address at the Installation of Two College Instructors,” trans. Joel L. Pless, *WLQ* 114 (2017): 149, 151. This sermon, translated by J. W. Klotz, is also found in *Lutheran Sentinel* 32, no. 6 (March 1948): 82–89.

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