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Tracing the Steps of the Circuit Pastor

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has not always had circuit pastors. Though initially the synod was without the establishment of the circuit pastor, few years passed before the conception of such an office.

It was in 1868 that the synod officially recognized "that some type of visitation system was necessary if the mission of the Gospel was truly to be fulfilled."¹

Conditions were such, it was felt, that without some sort of visitation program Gospel proclamation would be in jeopardy. But was it really so deplorable in those days?

Could conditions really hinder the mission of the Gospel? More importantly, was the concept of a visitation pastor the answer for such a situation?

Have conditions changed? Have things changed over the past 130 years to the extent that not as much of an emphasis needs to be placed on the need for a practical visitation program? In other words, is there not as much of a need for circuit pastors today because of the overall better conditions we enjoy?

Luther was well equipped to offer an answer to these types of questions in his day. "The devil has become neither pious nor devout this year, nor will he ever be so. So let us be on guard and anxious to keep (as Paul teaches) the spiritual unity in the bond of love and of peace [Eph. 4:3]. Amen."² Luther was well aware of the condition

¹ Handbook for Circuit Pastors, pg 4

² Luther, Martin, "Church and Ministry II." *Luther's Works (elec. ed.)*, Vol. 40. ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1958, 273.

of man's heart by nature. He realized natural man's heart was cold and desiring of self gratification and carnal pleasures of the flesh. He knew that with the devil on the loose, a dangerous combination lurked about.

The situation was in fact dangerous in the early days of our synod. President Bading expressed in 1872 in his President's Report at the 22nd Convention of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States that there was cause for concern. He reported the following concerning a plan for visitation introduced in 1871, "The office for visitation as resolved by the synod has not as yet been implemented as was hoped for."³ He goes on to urge those in attendance and to hint at the urgency.

It is therefore of the highest priority desirable that in the various synodical districts regular repeated visitations be made. Now and then incoming mail indicates what kind of unsteadiness and said conditions are found in some congregations. Already for years the synod has been made urgently aware of the need for regular visitations. May the warning voice not have to resound unheard much longer.⁴

One case which President Bading reported on in connection with his appeal was one that had to deal with misfortunes a congregation suffered at the hands of a fire.

Since we are speaking now about congregations, it causes me to recall, that some of our congregations of this state have experienced in a very painful manner the afflicting Hand of our God. Chiefly this is the case with our congregation in Peshtigo, which together with its soul caretaker have lost by the widely known fire not only all of their earthly possessions, but also in many families the loss of

³ Lehmann, Arnold, ed., "Proceedings of the 27th Convention of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Wisconsin and Other States." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, Vol. 24, Nu. 2. (Oct 2006), 11.

⁴ Lehmann, 11.

its members through death from the fire and suffocations. The urgent cry of fear and need throughout the land resounded not without results in congregations spared by grace from misfortune. Compassionate and helping hearts and hands sought to take care of the need and to dry the tears, but regular work with the word and in caretaking of the souls has not as yet been able to be begun in the afflicted areas.⁵

President Bading's concern was for all the members of a congregation and their families. It seems he brought up this scenario in connection with the visitation program because he felt that there needed to be a plan in place that would allow for a visiting shepherd under Christ to visit the hurting in a congregation, in which the congregation's own pastor could also benefit.

During this convention, and after President Bading's report, a doctrinal paper was presented on the topic of visitation. It consisted chiefly of a set of directions for visitations. Among these directions were guidelines specifically concerning the character of the visitor himself. Permit only a few to be introduced here.

1. He must himself be a pastor in a parish, cannot be new in the ministry, but must have had pastoral experiences and be found as a good steward of the secret things of God. (I Cor. 4:1-2).
2. The office of the Visitor is a confidential one. For this reason the Visitor must be worthy of the confidence of all pastors and congregations of his district.⁶

In addition to the character of the visitor, the office of the visitor was also addressed.

Again, only a few will be referred to.

⁵ Lehmann, 11.

⁶ Lehmann, 14.

1. He comes and works in the name and by the authority of the entire synod when he performs his official duties in a congregation.
2. He should through personal investigation and examination search the performance and special gifts of the pastors and teachers for the real reason to investigate and make judgment.
3. He should through wise and careful investigation cause those standing on opposite sides to enter open and specific statements concerning each other.
- §7. After this the Visitor speaks to the congregation, explaining in detail the purpose and meaning of the Visitation.
- §8. To this explanation by the Visitor is now added the congregation. It responds in the presence of the pastor on: [The Performance of the Pastor]⁷

In the next section the guidelines address how a pastor should serve in his particular office.

1. In regard to doctrine, how namely the doctrine of the pastor in his sermons to the congregation as well as in the religious instruction of the youth must be in agreement with the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, and how this is done in the correct separation of Law and Gospel, and in the doctrine of justification.⁸

Now the guidelines turn to the congregation and the visitor directs questions to it.

1. If the pastor can carry out his duties with joy in this congregation.
2. If the congregation members attend worship service faithfully and have home devotions.
6. Does it offer help to the poor and sick within the congregation.
7. Are the congregational meetings regularly attended.

⁷ Lehmann, 15.

⁸ Lehmann, 15.

“On the basis of these questions and the answers received, the Visitor takes the opportunity for instruction, punishment and comfort, and at the close of this hearing combines everything into a reassuring concluding talk.”⁹

A lot of thought and careful attention went into the guidelines for the first visitation program of the synod. Koehler remarks, “Such as they are, they could never be carried out, since that would have spelled an insufferable form of inquisition.”¹⁰ Because of the great detail that went into the first group of guidelines and its overbearing nature, 1873 was the only year, it appears, visitation of such a sort was conducted.

Koehler wrote in his history of the WELS what he felt was the concept of the office of visitor. He wrote, “The main thing is how the visitor goes about this task...The visitor is one who drops in to inquire about the weal and woe of Synod’s brethren, to share in both, and if necessary extend Synod’s help.”¹¹

Koehler realized there was more to this thing than a mere inquisition by a third party. It involved more than just asking the right questions and punishing the wrong answers. He believed,

A real visitor does not give himself official airs, which causes fear or distrust, nor does he stoop to snooping or prying, which invites gossip and leads to

⁹ Lehmann, 16.

¹⁰ Handbook, 5.

¹¹ Handbook, 5.

disrespect. Genuine consideration for both the good and evil fortune of a congregation invites confidence and respect for the larger family of brethren the visitor represents.¹²

Koehler believed that a visitor was not a person that could just be handed the position because of his low status on the totem pole. He believed the success of the visitation program depended in part on the personality of the visitor and how he deals with congregations and pastors he visits. He didn't believe there was any need for any special rules or guidelines for the person selected for such an office. He felt that a person selected for such a position was already so gifted by God that the guidelines were really unnecessary. But he also contended that this spoke to the seriousness due the consideration for the right man for this particular job.

As the years went by and the conferences grew the number of visitors slowly changed. Some new conferences were formed and visitors were elected for them. The larger conferences would sometimes elect more than one visitor. But there was still no program in place since the failed attempt in the late 19th century.

In 1946 the Northern Wisconsin District passed a resolution outlining the duties of the visitors and subvisitors. In 1954 the Minnesota District Pastoral Conference heard an essay on the need to further the unity of the Spirit among us through the office of the conference visitor. It was asserted that "this is an institution which among us has long languished in a state of relative disuse." In 1958 the Western Wisconsin District passed a resolution to implement the office of visitor.¹³

¹² Handbook, 5.

¹³ Handbook, 6.

The following resolution was adopted by the synod in 1959:

Whereas, the District Constitutions of the Synod state: 'The District shall exercise supervision over its members in matters of doctrine and practice through Visitors elected by the several Conferences; and
Whereas, there is some confusion within the Synod in defining the duties of the Visitors; therefore be it
Resolved, that the President of the Synod appoint a committee of five to study the duties and functions of the Visitor.¹⁴

At the synod convention of 1961 the president-appointed committee did in fact report on the duties of the Visitor and this report was adopted by the Synod with the provision "that the Synod at its next convention reevaluate this program with a view toward its possible inclusion, together with guidelines, in the Bylaws of the revised constitution."¹⁵

According to the Synod Constitution of 1961, Article XXI, the following are the

Duties of the Visitors.

Section 1. Conference Visitors shall visit each conference pastor at least every four years for the purpose of strengthening the unity of the Spirit. The Visitor shall also review the work of the pastor. He shall discuss the manner in which the goals and program of the Synod are being carried out and shall offer assistance in solving local problems.

Section 2. It shall also be the duty of the Visitor to visit congregations when invited by the pastor, the congregation, or the District President.

Section 3. The District Visitors shall meet annually in a District Visitors' Conference and shall submit a written report annually to the District President.¹⁶

¹⁴ Handbook, 6.

¹⁵ Handbook, 6.

¹⁶ Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *Constitution of 1961*, Article XXI, 43.

In 1965 the title of the office changed from "Conference Visitor" to "Visiting Elder." In 1975 the title of the office again changed to "Circuit Pastor."

Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st little has changed in the job description of the circuit pastor. Little has changed in the need of congregations for at times a visiting pastor to intercede in their daily affairs. What seems to have changed since the first set of guidelines established for the visitation program is the synod's attitude toward the need for a visitation program. It is possible that what began as a proactive ingredient in helping the advancement of the mission of the Gospel and facilitating good relations between pastor and parishioner has turned into more of a reactive, secondary responsibility given to an already overloaded pastor.

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