

# Issues in Parish Education

## Part I: Crises in Parish Education

*by James Tiefel*

### A. The Tasks of the Church

When the Lord Jesus Christ said, “Preach the gospel to every creature,” he gave the church the commission he intended it to carry out until Judgment Day. And what is the gospel? Let Luther answer:

The gospel is and should be nothing else than a chronicle, a story, a narrative about Christ, telling who he is, what he did, said, and suffered... There you have it. The gospel is a story about Christ, God’s Son and David’s Son, who died and was raised and is established as Lord. This is the gospel in a nutshell... For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ come to us, or we being brought to him. (LW, 35:117)

The gospel is nothing but a proclamation of God’s grace and of the forgiveness of sins, granted us through the sufferings of Christ. (LW, 35:108)

“Repent and believe the gospel” was the Savior’s essential message. Twice Jesus deputized his followers to personalize that essential message to those who repent or to withhold it from the impenitent: “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:23). Having been committed with the message of reconciliation and authorized to use it, the church’s task is to proclaim forgiveness. And to herald that gospel is to remain the essential task of the church. “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations,” Jesus said, “and then the end will come (Matthew 24:14).

The Savior’s commission to “make disciples of all nations” is not different from the commission to proclaim the forgiveness of sins, but it is an expansion of that primary command. Not only is the church to herald forgiveness, it is also to endeavor to bring all nations into the assembly of those who believe the forgiveness of sins, to guard their faith in Christ’s forgiveness, and to encourage them to daily drown the sinful flesh and follow Jesus ever more closely in joyful thanksgiving for his forgiveness.

By Jesus’ own instruction the church carries out this commission in two ways: First, by baptizing, by extending to all the “washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Secondly, by teaching (*διδάσκοντες*), by showing, then helping, then encouraging the baptized to follow and hold to everything Jesus has commanded.

Proclaiming forgiveness, baptizing, and teaching must be added to the breaking of bread (“do this in remembrance of me”) and be considered by the church to be the most important things it does.

### B. The Church Teaches

When Jesus reinstated Peter into the ranks of the apostles, he instructed him to “tend my sheep” (*ποίμανε*). Peter took that instruction seriously, for when he instructed elders in

congregations he encouraged them to “tend (ποιμάνετε) God’s flock that is under your care” (1 Peter 5:2). Paul used the same verb when he instructed the elders in Ephesus to “tend the church of God which he bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

The verb ποιμαίνω stands alongside διδάσκω and describes the church’s teaching task. Both words also lead us to understand that the church’s teaching is to be more than a mere imparting of facts. The first verb, διδάσκω, leads us to see teaching as the causing of someone to learn. As mentioned before, it is the church’s task to show what is to be learned, to help someone learn, and to encourage someone to learn. The second verb includes the idea that teaching is a crucial and careful process and also points to the continuous nature of teaching. The tending or shepherding process is an ongoing operation.

The first verb implies that the objectives of teaching might include solidification, explanation, and expansion. Other passages of Scripture seem to support those objectives. Jesus gave teachers to the church so that “we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). Peter encouraged Christians to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

The second verb leads us to agree that parish education has to be on-going; it also implies that Christian students lead lives that are beset with spiritual dangers. Lutherans do not believe in a Calvinistic “once saved–always saved” doctrine. It is the nature of faith to need constant nourishment. We understand Paul’s warning: “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Corinthians 10:12). This is why Paul encouraged Timothy: “Keep reminding them of these things” (2 Timothy 2:14). The example of the Galatians makes us take heed:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? (Galatians 3:1-3)

It is part of the Church’s task to teach and to tend, to employ God’s Word and then every God-pleasing method and tool to lead believers to listen, to learn, to understand, and to carry out God’s good and gracious will in their lives.

It is true, of course, that the church is not the only institution God commands to be involved in teaching. God instructs husbands to teach their wives and parents to teach their children. Older women (grandmothers, for example) are to teach younger women. It could be said with some justification that the home has the primary responsibility for Christian education. On the other hand, the church shares the task of teaching with the home and, since the church trains the parents of children, the church might be said to have the primary responsibility.

### **C. The Pastor Teaches**

The members of the church have been authorized by Christ to designate and call certain men (and women in some cases) to serve on their behalf in the public or representative ministry. These called servants are also to be involved in teaching and tending. The Scriptures set down the qualifications these servants require. It is interesting to note that, while no special

qualifications are mentioned for the tasks of announcing forgiveness, baptizing, or conducting the worship of the assembly, there is a qualification concerning the teaching aspect of the public ministry; one who desires the office of an overseer must be “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2). It may be worth noting that it was especially the work of teaching (along with preaching) that led Paul to conclude that the elder was worthy of double honor (1 Timothy 5:17).

Since the offices of the public ministry during the first centuries of the New Testament era were not the same as 20th century positions, it is difficult for us to compare contemporary pastoral involvement in teaching with that of the early church. We can assume, however, that all offices of the ministry were engaged in teaching, since the first three or four centuries after Christ were very much an “educational” era. Adults were not even baptized until a thorough and rigorous educational experience had been completed (in some cases the training lasted three years before baptism), and it is likely that the entire hierarchy of the church was involved in the catechuminate.

The teaching tasks of the public ministry were greatly minimized during the medieval era. The primary task of the “pastor” was to serve as priest and mediator; he was to conduct the performance of the mass and to effect the consecration. Not until the Lutheran Reformation was the emphasis on teaching reestablished in the pastorate. It was after the Reformation, according to Werner Elert, that “the pastoral profession (*Pfarrerstand*) was made the teaching profession (*Lehrstand*).”<sup>1</sup> It is interesting that Adolph Hoenecke in his *Dogmatik* entitled the section of the public ministry “*Das Lehramt*.”

Pastoral teaching is still an important and vital part of the work of a pastor in the Wisconsin Synod. This is true in part because of the duties (some gained from Scripture, some gained from historical example) which are attached to the office of overseer. This is also true because of the training we give to pastors. None of the other offices held in WELS congregations today have the thorough background in scriptural and doctrinal training as does the office of the pastor. It is for this reason that there seems to be a very clear consensus in our church body that general doctrinal and spiritual oversight of congregations should remain with the pastoral ministry. Pastor Thomas Nass wrote in a 1993 conference essay:

As the “resident theologian” with the most thorough theological training, the pastor will also be the primary teacher of adults in the congregation. As the doctrinal overseer of the congregation, he will be responsible for all teaching in the congregation.<sup>2</sup>

Today’s pastor functions, then, not only as teacher, but also as overseer of other teachers in the congregation he serves. The Lutheran elementary school, the Sunday School, the various organizations in the congregation formed for the purpose of Bible study, the Bible classes, all fall under his oversight. The pastor works, of course, with teachers and with laymen and women involved in the administration of the various educational agencies. The ultimate responsibility for the supervision of parish education remains, however, with the pastor.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elert, Werner. *The Structure of Lutheranism*. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962) p. 362.

<sup>2</sup> Nass, Thomas. “The Pastoral Ministry as a Distinct Form of the Public Ministry.” Conference essay, September 20, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> The pastoral theology textbook, *Shepherd Under Christ* (Armin Schuetze and Irwin Habeck), uses this language almost exactly to describe the pastor’s role in the Lutheran elementary school.

This truth puts the pastor in a distinctive although difficult position as we address the topic “Crises in Parish Education.”

#### **D. Crises in Parish Education**

When the Wisconsin Synod was founded in 1850, the contemporary wisdom in parish education was that children should be in the spotlight of any educational system. American education was moving in that direction; the first compulsory school attendance law, for instance, was passed in 1852. Religious educators, primarily in Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches, had long been convinced of the value of religious education for children; and the national mood seemed to vindicate the theological point of view.

There was not, however, in America’s agrarian society, much of an inclination to continue the educational process after adolescence. Adult education was reserved for a few, therefore, in both the community and the church. The conclusion of formal education at the point of adulthood certainly harmed the community in some cases, although the evidence of this may not have been conspicuous. For the most part women stayed at home as wives and mothers; husbands tended to hold the same profession for a lifetime. In many cases, sons came to be employed in the same fields or shops as their fathers. In most cases, women married and lived in the social communities in which they had been born.

That formal education ended at adolescence was surely a disadvantage to the Lutheran church as well. But again, the evidence of harm may not always have been obvious. It is difficult to substantiate that more Lutheran adults involved themselves in private and informal Bible study a century ago. Personal recollections, anecdotes, and the Seminary library’s collection of old German devotional books leave the impression they did. Pastors could not have been alarmed at the lack of adult education in the parish when they knew that many adults were devoted to their hymnals and Bibles at home.

Nor would they have been concerned about lapses in Christian morality or backdoor membership losses. Whatever the occurrence of private study might have been, it seems that the lifestyle of church-going Lutheran adults a century ago matched Scriptural emphases fairly well. The home took the lead in imparting these emphases. Moral values and religious habits were learned by children at home from parents and grandparents; they were solidified at the church school. There were some children, of course, who rejected these values as adults, but there were many others who knew that any attempt to repudiate Christian values and break spiritual habits would be impeded by the strong arm and example of the home. In the main, children grew to adulthood and remained within the sphere of the gospel’s influence because of the strength of their home and family structure.

In the decades since the founding of our synod, our commitment to the religious education of children has been strengthened. Virtually all of our congregations sponsor an active Sunday School program. Almost 400 of our congregations<sup>4</sup> support Lutheran elementary schools at which 31,000 children receive religious education as well as secular education taught in the light of God’s Word. Federations of congregations operate 20 area Lutheran high schools with a combined enrollment of almost 4,200. Our educational system is the envy of many who have come to know our program.

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<sup>4</sup> There are 363 Lutheran elementary schools in the WELS. Some of these are joint schools, operated by several congregations. Since their members send children to another congregation’s school, many congregations support schools other than their own by means of tuition payments or some other form of budget subsidy.

As we rejoice in these blessings, it must be said that we continue to be disappointed by church attendance statistics which indicate that far less than 40% of our baptized members are in church on an average weekend.<sup>5</sup> Special studies have been commissioned because of our concerns over “backdoor losses.” The number of adult confirmations in the WELS (and certainly adult baptisms) give no indication that our members are determined to be minded toward personal evangelism. Our congregational and synodical giving averages land us only in the middle of the pack in comparison with other American denominations. While I have no statistics for this, single-parent families and broken marriages do not seem to be less common among us than in other church bodies.

Do these observations indicate that we have been slipping in our commitment to child Christian education? Not at all. Our Sunday Schools are better staffed, use better materials, and enjoy more congregational support and interest than ever in our history. Little needs to be said about our elementary and secondary schools. They are a magnificent testimony to the commitment of our church to the education of young people. It is precisely at the point where the obvious excellence of these institutions combines with the sad state of affairs in church attendance, stewardship, evangelism, and lifestyle where we see underscored the contention that the essential ingredient in the Christian education, training, and molding of Christian children is the Christian home and the Christian adults who live in the home. In short, even the best educational efforts on the part of the “secondary group” cannot often overcome the negative influence of the “primary group.”<sup>6</sup> And we contend, to our sadness, that too many Christian homes are becoming negative influences in the spiritual development of children.

This essay does not intend to offer a history of the demise of the American home. The process is well-substantiated. Even national commentators and polls express serious concerns. The point for our purposes is that the Christian home, a hundred years ago the church’s and the pastor’s primary ally in teaching and tending, has all but abandoned its position. The demise of the home, together with the loss of its lifestyle-setting influence and its spiritual leverage, has had more impact on parish education, I believe, than any other single event. The failure of the home has led to crises in parish education.

### **Crisis 1**

While almost all WELS pastors have come to see the necessity of adult education, the majority of WELS members and congregations seem still to hold to a parish education perspective that sees the education of children as primary. The church’s education of children presupposes, however, that the home is strong and supportive, offering to children a fundamental set of Scriptural values and habits. If one accepts the contention that many WELS homes are not strong and supportive, then one must conclude that the WELS educational priority is not operating in the environment which conceived it and made it what it intended to be. This has created a difficult situation. Congregational members are willing and eager to support their Sunday Schools, Lutheran elementary schools and area Lutheran high schools. But the very entity which made those agencies successful, the congregation’s corps of adults, is not often thought of as the congregation’s primary educational objective.

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<sup>5</sup> The recorded statistic is 45.6%. This is the average of *communicant* members at Sunday worship.

<sup>6</sup> In sociology, the primary group is that group which has most influence on an individual. In most cases the primary group is the family. The secondary group is thought to include the school, the church, the extended family, etc.

## **Crisis 2**

For most of our synod's history the crown of child education has been confirmation. Youth confirmation in many of our churches is accompanied by more pomp and ceremony than any other congregational event, save perhaps Christmas Eve. Confirmation may have more spiritual and social implications in our circles than anything else we do.

Although confirmation has certain elements which commend its continued use, Lutheran studies produced over the last 25 years have called its position into question from historical, theological, and practical points of view. The primary concern among Lutherans has been that confirmation seems to signal an end of formal Christian education. Some contend that confirmation customs and practices have actually organized the Lutheran church into a child-teaching but not an adult-teaching denomination. It is not the reality, of course, that is hurting us; it is the perception. No congregation and no pastor says that Christian education ends at the 8th grade. But what else besides confirmation could be leaving the impression with both children and adults that formal education does in fact end at 8th grade?

Several commissions of our synod have worked seriously on the issue of youth confirmation. Reports at the twelve district conventions last summer suggested changes in our traditional procedures. The reaction to the report was, in many cases, lukewarm. Of course, some asked legitimate questions. But one can't help wondering if the primary concern on the part of many is that Lutheran adults will not take changes in confirmation practices "sitting down." One wonders if pastors are not frankly frightened of trying to change traditions which have been in place for generations. I recall an episode in my Saginaw ministry when suggested changes only in the method of confirmation examination provoked a worried backlash among some laypeople.

The perceptions which surround confirmation are hurting us. Hardly a pastor would disagree. But to change confirmation may also hurt us, at least in the short run. Pastors who endure criticism on a dozen fronts cannot be blamed for being less than enthusiastic about trying to convince adults of a new program that many adults will surely oppose.

## **Crisis 3**

The solution to Crisis 1 seems simple enough: strengthen the home and the adults who live there through study of the Word. Unfortunately, this is not being done as well as we would like it to be done in our synod. A quick perusal of the WELS *Statistical Report* reveals that less than 13 % of WELS teens and adults are involved in any sort of religious education program. The truth is that this synodical statistic looks better than it is. In the five Midwestern districts (where the vast majority of our children reside) the figure is 10% . At a time when our educational programs for children require the education of their parents as never before (as well as other adults in a child's sphere of influence), adults are not much involved in education.

## **Crisis 4**

Although adults need what may be gained from Christian education, they are not attending Bible classes in any more than token numbers. In a recent poll conducted by the Commission on Adult Discipleship, 45% of pastoral respondents indicated that the primary problem in gaining adults for Bible classes was "lack of interest."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Adult Bible Study Trends in the WELS." WELS Commission on Adult Discipleship Survey, March, 1994.

It would be easy to lose patience with adults in the WELS, but perhaps patience is a virtue we ought to retain. The adults in our congregations are beset with temptations that come from alarming national attitudes. Materialism has become the religion of America. Getting and Having are the American gods. In order to gain admission into the temples of these gods, Americans – and American Lutherans – work overtime, invariably under physical stress and mental strain. When the work day or work week is over, they collapse and then cocoon, as do the majority of their neighbors. Whatever leisure time is available – and leisure time is plentiful enough – is spent either on diversions (golf, tennis, softball, bowling) or driving, that is, driving children from one extra-curricular event to another. Even if one or another Lutheran adult has himself overcome the trap of materialism, he works with people and lives next door to people and has children who interact with other children who know no other religion than this American philosophy. In truth, many adults in our congregations have good intentions; perhaps the successful sale of the volumes of the *People's Bible* indicates that adults do desire religious education. They have come to the conclusion, and perhaps with some defense, that they simply do not have time in their hectic schedules and lifestyles for Bible study. At exactly the time WELS members need growth and training the most, they have the least time to do it.

### **Crisis 5**

The burden to address these very real problems lies with the congregation and especially with its pastor, the resident theologian and primary teacher. Pastors seem to recognize that their members' schedules are hectic and diverse. They understand that different members may have different educational priorities. They tend to be willing to offer a fairly wide variety of educational subjects and opportunities. In the CAD poll, 94% indicated that at least three opportunities were being offered each week, and 41% indicated they desired to offer more opportunities.

The crisis is that pastors recognize their work load is getting heavier and their schedules are getting busier with each passing year. This reality needs no documentation in this room. Most pastors are honest enough to admit that one of the most important aspects of today's pastoral ministry – teaching adults – is not getting done as they wish it were because of the press of other duties.

### **Crisis 6**

25 % of the 780 respondents to the Commission on Adult Discipleship's poll listed "lack of manpower" as the greatest obstacle to getting more people into Bible (lack of interest received the highest rating, as I have noted). It would seem that this problem can be solved. Every year since 1980 the Seminary has offered more graduates to the synod than have been able to be assigned. We have theologically trained men to fill the manpower shortages. The same is true of our teacher training school; we have men available. We have good men available, men who have a high degree of theological training and insight and who have taken courses in educational methodology.

We tend to see it as a negative factor that we have teacher candidates without calls. We consider it a tragedy that the paucity of synodical offerings is not allowing us to open new missions, leaving us with pastor candidates without calls. Yet these so-called negatives and tragedies may in fact be blessings for parish adult education. We have men available today who would not have been available 25 years ago. We seem to have the manpower a quarter of our pastors deem necessary to carry on an expanded program of adult education.

What might be a blessing has become a crisis because many congregations are not able to afford the salaries of the men who are available for service. The synod's *1994 Yearbook* lists only a handful of teacher-trained men who serve congregations in the area of adult education. Only two of the eleven staff ministers listed in the yearbook are involved in education or discipleship. Only one congregation in the synod has four pastors – and that congregation has 2900 communicants (it also has a teacher-trained minister of adult education). Three 2000 communicants congregations have three pastors. There are 47 congregations in the synod with over 1000 communicants; eleven are served by three pastors. Of the 165 WELS congregations with over 500 communicants, 58 have only one pastor. One congregation with less than 1000 communicants has three pastors; eleven congregations under 500 communicants are served by two pastors. One can prove anything with statistics, of course, but it is interesting to note that in these last eleven congregations, 22% of communicants attend a weekly Bible class.

The pastor finds himself in a difficult situation. He is convinced that additional manpower would greatly benefit the cause of adult education in his parish. As he looks for support in this opinion, he runs directly into the issue of money. He and his lay leaders see that fully 75% to 85% of the congregation's general offerings are needed to support the parish school and the area Lutheran high school. He believes that these agencies are not serving optimally because adults are not strong in the Lord. Unfortunately, these same adult weaknesses are responsible for poor stewardship and minimal offerings. When the pastor cannot find additional monies, he is faced with the prospect of moving money from one area of ministry to another. He cannot move money away from child education (although it uses the most money), however, because his members are committed to child education! This seems to be a crisis in parish education.

### **Crisis 7**

In many circles the problem described above would not be a crisis at all. The problem of finding time and manpower to teach adults would be solved by using lay teachers, i.e., members of the congregation who could be trained to conduct Bible classes either at the church location or in small group settings.

Small group study is the adult education phenomenon of the '90s. A recent Gallup study indicated that as many as 40% of American adults are involved in a small group of one kind or another. The poll identified the following as small groups: Sunday School classes, Bible study groups, political/current events groups, self-help groups, sports/hobby-event groups. Carl George's recent tome on the Meta-church idea, "Prepare your Church for the Future," sets up the lay-led small-group concept as the quintessential form of ministry in our present era.

There has been great interest in the WELS in the small group idea. Several pastors have produced explanatory and promotional materials for courses they have prepared. One pastor wrote, "Small groups provide an almost unparalleled setting for many relational mandates given to us by God." Lay leaders might be involved in other adult education forums besides the small groups. In fact, the recent CAD poll indicated that 85% of respondents had used lay teachers in some way or another. 59% submitted that they would be quite likely to use member teachers in the future. Two of the most important Bible study tools produced in our synod over the last ten years, *Training Christians for Ministry* and the CAD's just-proposed *Curriculum of Repeating Adult Bible Studies* are both designed primarily for lay leadership. In some circles of our synod lay-led Bible classes seem to meet the challenge we face in finding money and manpower for adult education.



The desire is not divorced, however, from a deep concern that these lay teachers be well-trained and that they use materials which are solidly Lutheran. The CAD poll revealed that 41% of WELS pastors were not at all convinced about using lay people to teach the Bible to adults. Even those who seemed intrigued by the idea set down careful parameters. Asked to complete this sentence, “I would consider using lay Bible study leaders in the future if...” pastors ranked the following as the two most important answers:

...a course were available to train adult Bible study leaders.

...NPH produces a series of solidly Lutheran studies for lay leaders.

The personal comments many pastors attached to the poll were perhaps more revealing about their attitudes and concerns. One gains the impression that positive answers to the question about lay teachers were not given without qualifications. One pastor wrote:

Concept of lay leaders is good as long as limits remain set – problem is down the way when these leaders “are skilled” in their little leadership and feel qualified then to make all decisions and lead all classes – why then insist on strict pastoral program of Greek/Hebrew, etc.

An answer to a prayer that may not be an answer to a prayer – this is what many pastors seem to see in lay-led Bible classes.

### **Crisis 8**

The pastor who serves a WELS congregation knows very well how important good methodology is in his ministrations. He learned this truth while he was still at the seminary. Both his homiletics and education professors stressed the importance of methods: good outlines, free delivery, catechetical method, agree/disagree questions, etc. What he sees on the congregational scene supports everything he learned. People respond well when he is well-prepared. They like classes which allow interaction and problem-solving. The professional journals he picks up and reads – *Leadership, Ministry, Parish Leadership* – all exalt the role of methods in Christian pastoring.

I am convinced most pastors desire to use the best methods they can. What is disconcerting to them and to us is that methods are occasionally perceived and then passed off as being capable of replacing the means of grace in promoting and achieving success in ministry. This concern is hardly unsubstantiated. Since the days of American revivalism (and before) many of the Reformed (especially with an Arminian orientation) have been convinced that spiritual and numerical growth can be achieved in the church as long as the proper methods are employed. Much of the supposed success of the small group phenomenon, for instance, has more to do with group dynamics and teaching methods than it does with the use of law and gospel. The proper use of the proper methodology is the heart and soul of today’s church growth industry. Some of our best authors (e.g., David Valleskey and Robert Koester) have identified the errors of the church growth movement and warned us to be very selective in using methods suggested by these organizations.

We come to a crisis in this area when it becomes obvious that pastors struggle with these issues. Some, with deep concerns about slackness and slowness of growth in our congregations,

seem too eager to follow Luther's advice, "Something must be dared for the sake of Christ," seem to be willing to dare too much. Others, with deep concern about church growth infiltration, loose sight of the proper understanding and use of methods. After reminding readers that God's success is often hidden in weakness and failure, and pointing to the success which always accompanies the proclamation of the gospel, I concluded an essay for the WELS Spiritual Renewal effort with the following paragraph:

But there is another temptation which can destroy the value of our work. It comes in forms similar to this: "The power is in the gospel and not in our forms, methods, and procedures. Therefore, we may proclaim the gospel without regard or concern for these." At first glance the temptation sounds remarkably similar to a confession of the truth. In reality it is not less a deception than were Satan's words to Eve, "You will be like God, knowing good and evil." This latter temptation was a half-truth and succeeded in leading Eve to violate God's plan for her life and God's world. The former temptation is a caricature of the truth and succeeds in leading us to violate God's design for the proclamation of the gospel. The caricature allows us to be content with out-of-date methods, satisfied with half-hearted efforts, and disinclined to be continually analytical of ourselves and our ministry. No servant of God dare boldly assert "I am proclaiming the gospel" without humbly asking, "Am I proclaiming the gospel as God would have me?" A determination to find the best ways to communicate the gospel and to employ the best forms and methods in today's ministry is not inconsistent with a sincere faith in the gospel. Francis Rossow wrote: "The foolishness of our preaching consists in its content, not in its style. What is foolish is our message, not the manner of communicating the message. The foolishness of preaching does not necessitate foolish preaching." Each of us must learn to be forever content with the successes of the gospel but forever discontent with his own efforts to proclaim the gospel.

Such discontent for us is nothing else but a burden of joy.

We will continue to find ourselves in crisis as we struggle to use methods in the ministry of the means of grace.

### **Crisis 9**

At its beginning this essay opined that the pastor's role in parish education put him into a distinctive although difficult position. We underscore here the difficult part of his role. As the WELS pastor serves in the present era he needs to take the lead in analyzing and solving the crises which have been identified. Not all may agree that the crises mentioned are acute in his own congregation. Some may not agree that there are as many crises as have been listed. But all will surely agree that there is critical work that needs to be done and that the pastor will have to set the pace to do it. He needs to be creative but careful, firm but fair, progressive but patient. He needs to lead as the Scriptures define leadership for the sake of his God and for the sake of his people, both of whom he desires to serve faithfully.

The angels in heaven will rejoice in the pastor's faithful service. The people on earth may not. Today's parish pastor understands that his leadership is challenged in ways pastoral leadership has not been challenged in many years. He is liable to be litigated in court and

castigated in coffee shops. Here is the crisis: pastoral leadership is vital today, as important as it has been in any era of history. But pastoral leadership is threatened today as much as it has been in any era of history. The pastor himself is in crisis; he is so concerned about not becoming a pastoral pope that he runs the risk of becoming a pastoral wimp.

### **Crisis 10**

Even his church body threatens him, or so he supposes. While he struggles to keep his head above water (i.e., his schedule), his mail box is bloating with suggestion after suggestion, program after program, seminar after seminar. In the constant barrage of suggestions, programs, and seminars some pastors see disapproval of the way they have been conducting their ministries, and that disapproval hurts and wounds. The wounds fester into distrust, disgust, and eventually dismissal. Never before in the history of the WELS has there been more assistance available to parish pastors for carrying out their ministries. Never before has there been so much encouragement to address the issues of parish education. But many pastors, under siege as they are or suppose themselves to be, toss the materials and perceive the encouragement to be criticism. This, to my way of thinking, is a crisis.

It must be said at this point that the threats some pastors perceive coming from synodical leaders are not altogether the result of pastoral paranoia. Leaders who care a great deal are sometime critical of those they perceive do not care as much. Such an attitude can lead to carelessness in approach, speech, and decision-making. A solution to this crisis must be achieved by pastors and leaders working together. It will not be achieved by one group waiting for the other to change.

### **E. Conclusion**

The conclusion to this first essay in “Issues in Parish Education” will admit that the essay means to be an introduction to the four essays that will follow. One hesitates to play the prelude in a minor key, and to a certain extent, this essay has a negative tone to it.

It must be said that some of the crises I have identified are being addressed. In an essay prepared some ten years ago, I discovered that 11% of WELS adults were attending Bible class; the statistic in 1993 was 12.8%. The figure in the five Midwestern districts was 5% ten years ago. More than 10% of adults were attending Bible studies in 1993. Obviously, the Lord is blessing our labors.

The fact that 12.8% of our adults are attending Bible classes is good, however, only in comparison to the previous figure. A church body which takes its stand on an inspired and inerrant Scripture cannot be satisfied with such an attendance figure. That 81.2% of our confirmed members do not attend a Bible class is, in fact, a crisis. So is the possibility that we may be supporting a magnificent educational system without its most important ingredient, i.e., the example and spirituality of the home. We will remain in crisis if we cannot find ways to add forces to the public ministry in order to deal with adults, but we will encounter a greater crisis if, in our efforts to expand ministry, we lose the means of grace which are the substance of ministry. We have a crisis of faithfulness on our hands if we employ methods which replace the means of grace, but we will confront the same crisis if we fail to use all the good gifts God has given us to proclaim the everlasting gospel.

It seems to me that we need to approach these crises in parish education honestly and sincerely. We need to pray for guidance and direction. We need to listen and learn. Perhaps the essays over the next several weeks will, in some small way, help us toward that end.

# Issues in Parish Education

## Part II: Staffing Parish Education

*by James Tiefel*

### A. The Situation With Parish Staffing

Where and when Lutherans have understood what the Scriptures say about the public ministry of the gospel, there have not been many problems designating and filling a variety of offices and positions in the congregation. The willingness to establish various ministerial offices has been a blessing to the church, and nowhere is this more obvious than in parish education.

The Lutheran Confessions imitate the Scriptures in their understanding that it is the work of the ministry which is important, not the form, title, or variety of various positions.

From the Lutheran Confessions we can learn about the work of the public ministry. We do not find a church constitution which tells us what is to be distinct about the office of pastor in contrast with other offices.<sup>8</sup>

A look at the staff of St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg during the pastorate of Johannes Bugenhagen offers a Reformation illustration of orthodox Lutheran practice. The large congregation and its satellite parishes were served by one pastor (Bugenhagen), four deacons, one school master for the Latin school, another for the "girl's school," and a sexton. There seem to have been no problems at Luther's congregation understanding the parish staff concept.

The church in history has also understood that it is the call into the public ministry which determines not only the scope of the service but also, to a great extent, what qualifications are necessary. The qualifications Paul lists for overseers in 1 Timothy 3 are different from those he lists for deacons; Paul's list for deacons is different from the list of qualifications for deacons in Acts 6. The qualifications were different because the form of the public ministry was different. Not all forms of ministry involve the same kind of service; not all require the same kind of preparation.

We are able to observe a contemporary application of this New Testament concept in our own congregations. Men and women who present themselves to the church for calls as elementary and secondary teachers receive a less-intensive theological training than men who make themselves available for calls as parish pastors. Men and women who agree to serve as Sunday School teachers receive less training than either pastors or full-time teachers. Men and women who are designated by a congregation to serve as member evangelists receive a different kind of training than Sunday School teachers receive. That this New Testament concept (which is, after all, descriptive and not prescriptive) is still very common among us shows what a practical approach it is.

Despite the fact that these concepts seem so obvious to us, it remains true that the church has had to struggle from time to time with its understanding and use of multiple offices of the public ministry. There have not always been such plain and easy applications of the principles. In certain places and eras Christian churches have adopted a "pastors only" mentality that seemed to hold that only the pastor could function as the administrator of the means of grace. At other

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<sup>8</sup> Nass, Thomas. "The Pastoral Ministry as a Distinct Form of the Public Ministry." Conference essay, September, 1993.

times and in other eras, Christian assemblies downgraded and even abandoned the idea of a trained clergy and entrusted the public ministry to men (and women) with little or no formal training.

Orthodox Lutherans in our era have struggled to hold a middle position. They have been determined to train full-time ministers (primarily pastors and teachers) who have a thorough religious and professional education. At the same time they have been willing to call into specific areas of the public ministry individual Christians who have less theological and professional training than pastors and teachers.

Lutherans have had to struggle to copy the New Testament and Reformation models also because of constraints in manpower and money. It is likely that these constraints (and not any “pastors only” mentality) forced many WELS parish pastors a generation ago to add elementary school teaching to their already busy schedules. When the manpower became available – first by the arrival of school teachers from Germany and then by the founding of a teacher training college – and when funds were accessible, the WELS did not encounter problems calling teachers to serve in elementary and (eventually) secondary schools.

It must be said, however, that the division of duties for pastors and teachers has had to do with ministry to adults and children. In the main, pastors served adults and their children, and teachers served children and perhaps teens. Before 1970 it would have been rare in the WELS for a teacher to teach an adult Bible class. We doubt that this situation existed for any other reason than that most of our male teachers were already struggling with over-filled schedules. The general parish staff rule was born, therefore, in practicality: The pastor for adults, the teacher for children. The situation worked fairly well in the WELS for generations.

We will not repeat the litany of sorrow that sin has inflicted on American society, its homes, and even the church during the last several decades. We will contend again, however, that this changing scene is what is causing the church to rethink its time-honored approach to parish staffing.

The necessary adjustments in the Lutheran elementary school came quickly. Classrooms filled with 40-plus students – a general rule 25 years ago – are virtually unheard of today. The present statistic indicates that the average classroom size in WELS schools is about 21 students. In some of our larger schools faculty size did not diminish despite lower enrollments; in others faculty size increased while enrollment stayed the same. Assistance to teachers has increased as well. It is a rare school of 75 students that does not have some sort of clerical help. None of this means that WELS teachers have a easy lot. They still are expected to carry a heavier work load than most teachers in the public system. It does mean that our schools have adjusted quite well to changing times.

Adjustments have not come as quickly at the pastoral level. More and more pastors are finding it impossible to keep up with, let alone expand, the work assigned to pastoral ministry. The first essay in this series indicated that 35% of WELS congregations over 500 communicants are still served by only a single pastor, and that only 11 of 47 congregations over 1000 communicants are served by three pastors. Many of the congregations in this last group have not seen a pastoral staff increase in 50 years!

There have been some adjustments, of course. More congregations are served by two pastors today than 20 years ago. More congregations assist their pastor with a full-time or part-time secretary. Team ministry on the pastoral level is openly discussed in our circles. It remains true that the traditional axiom has continued to remain in place, however: pastors for

adults, teachers for children. Congregations that desire to expand pastoral ministry do so by calling another pastor.

It was during the early days of the 1980s that voices began to sound concerns that there may not be enough pastors to go around. Enrollments at Northwestern College had begun to shrink, and the serious question was being asked whether the Seminary would be able to graduate enough pastoral candidates simply to offset retirements and resignations. Some worried that there would not be enough candidates to man new mission openings. Others feared that congregations desiring to expand pastoral staffs would not be able to do so. These were the concerns, among others, that led our synod to consider and then establish a Staff Ministry Program.

## **B. Staff Ministry**

It was in the spring of 1990 that a joint committee, consisting of members of the Conference of Presidents, the Board for Parish Services, and the Board for Ministerial Education (then BWT) was formed to follow up on previous studies regarding staff ministry in the WELS. The committee's formal report and recommendations were brought to the 1991 synod convention. The opening paragraph of the presentation reports:

Since a 1983 synod convention resolution urging the study of "additional forms of ministry," the Conference of Presidents, the Board for Parish Services, and the Board for Worker Training have each appointed committees addressed to this subject. Scripture study, research on parish ministry in our synod and brotherly dialogue have led to a joint recommendation that the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod authorize and provide for offices of ministry in the congregation in addition to those of pastor and teacher. Such "staff ministry" positions as Minister of Evangelism, Family and Youth Minister, Deaconess, or Minister of Administration would serve congregations in public ministry under the spiritual direction of the pastor.<sup>9</sup>

The report made it clear that the positions it was suggesting should receive training that was no less thorough than the training given to Lutheran elementary and secondary teachers. From the beginning it was obvious that Dr. Martin Luther College was best suited to carry out the training. A five-year baccalaureate program was suggested with three components: general education in the liberal arts, religion parallel to what teacher candidates receive, and professional courses designed to equip candidates with the competencies necessary to serve as staff ministers. The report also suggested a post-graduate certification program for older students who already had a baccalaureate degree. This certification could be earned by those who desired to serve in a staff ministry or by those who were serving already in congregation. In all cases Christian character and theological discernment would be important factors when supervising faculties recommended individuals to the Conference of Presidents for assignment or certification.

The 1991 report indicated that the matter of a staff ministry position in the area of counseling should be referred to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The Seminary faculty studied the issue and wondered whether beginning such a program would be practical and would allow the seminary to remain a single purpose school. In February of 1993 the Board for Ministerial Education accepted the faculty's recommendation that such a position should not be established

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<sup>9</sup> *Book of Reports and Memorial*, 1991, p. 175.

and that a training program should not be offered. The faculty has since determined that it will offer a Master of Sacred Theology degree in the area of Pastoral Theology. This program will allow a pastoral graduate student to earn an academic degree in pastoral counseling. The faculty has also recommended that Martin Luther College add course offerings in counseling for all its students, whether they are in the teacher, pastor, or staff ministry tracks.

The staff ministry program came to life at Dr. Martin Luther College in January of 1993 when Pastor Lawrence Olson accepted the call as director of the program. Pastor Olson will continue to serve in this capacity after DMLC and Northwestern College amalgamate. As one might have expected, there have been some refinements to the original recommendation since the formal beginnings of the staff ministry program. The several tracks are not as clearly defined as they were in the 1991 recommendation. The professional component includes, for example, both a core of required courses for all staff ministers and a number of electives in specialized areas such as evangelism, youth work, family ministry, administration, stewardship, parish education, and the like. The program envisions that congregational needs and not the staff ministry curriculum will determine the scope of a staff minister's responsibilities. It envisions a wide spectrum of duties and explains this point of view by noting the wide variety of positions that already exist in the synod: Minister of Music and Education, Minister of Family and Youth, Minister of Discipleship, Director of Christian Education, Family Minister, Director of Discipleship, Program Director, Minister of Music, Minister of Evangelism, Church Administrator, Minister of Administration, Deaconess, and Parish Nurse. The program anticipates that Parish Assistant and Parish Associate might indicate service which is different from and perhaps broader than any of the above position titles.

The staff minister program began accepting students in the summer of 1994. At the present time nine students are on campus in New Ulm. Four freshmen are enrolled in a dual teacher/staff minister program (This is the program which freshmen are advised to take.). Two are seeking B.S. degrees in staff ministry; three are involved in certification programs. In addition to these, nine students have begun work in the staff ministry course via correspondence courses.

This essay does not intend to answer every question about the staff ministry concept or the DMLC/MLC program. It does mean, however, to issue an encouragement to pastors to begin thinking seriously about the use and advantage of a staff minister in their parish program. In my opinion, the staff ministry concept has much to commend it both in congregations without an elementary school and in those with a school. In both cases, the ministry is served and is able to be expanded. With the addition of a staff minister pastors are able to share or even be relieved of duties which they would otherwise be required to carry out alone. This would allow pastors to utilize their specialized theological training, leadership skills, and pastoral experience in situations where these qualities are absolutely vital. At the same time they would be able to expand ministry in areas where staff ministers might have the necessary qualifications.

Surely, the staff minister concept has much promise and potential as we strive to achieve adequate staffing for parish education.

### **C. Member Ministry in Adult Education**

The 1991 report on staff ministry made it clear that staff ministers should be seen as being different from "member ministry," that is, public ministry in the congregation which is carried out by lay members called to specific areas of service, e.g., Sunday School teaching or assistance in youth ministry.

For many years faithful members of WELS congregations have assisted pastors in various areas of the public ministry. They have done this in a spirit of Christian service. They have spent many hours in training and working and carried on their ministry with little or no compensation other than the Savior's "Well done, good and faithful servant." These "member ministers" have served both adults and children as Sunday School teachers, Vacation Bible School teachers, youth leaders, visitation elders, evangelists, shut-in visitors, etc. The church's ministry has been incalculably blessed by their service.

The information that the Commission on Adult Discipleship gathered in its recent questionnaire asked the question: "Have lay people led Bible studies of any kind in your congregation recently?" 85 % of the responding pastors answered in the affirmative. Even the strongest advocates of member ministry admit, however, that these answers do not indicate that WELS lay people are actively involved in many formal and on-going teaching situations for adults. Member ministers may be teaching Sunday School or a Bible study in a stewardship program. It is not too bold to suggest, however, that one area in which member ministers have not often served is in the ministry of adult education.

There seem to be good reasons for this. The kind of detailed instruction and mature insight which the teaching of adults requires is best suited for the pastor's training and abilities. Even when members have good teaching skills and a high degree of Bible knowledge, they do not always possess the gift of discernment. In his essay on the pastoral ministry, Pastor Nass wrote:

It is the observation also of this author that distinguishing law and gospel clearly and highlighting justification is not something that comes intuitively to Christians. Unless a person is properly trained, he very likely will not distinguish law and gospel clearly. He very likely will not highlight justification as a Lutheran preacher should in his public proclamation.<sup>10</sup>

If anything, the times we live in demand a more thorough training for teachers. A pastor responded in the CAD questionnaire:

In today's doctrinal hodgepodge of Lutheran/Reformed ideas, we not only need lay leaders with a talent for teaching, but also with a very solid doctrinal background. It is not easy to recruit such in every congregation.<sup>11</sup>

The pastor who responded makes an important point, I think, and encourages us to move with caution as we promote and use member ministers in the education of adults. We need to take care lest we give the impression that member ministry is "the way to go" in expanding ministry to adults. To begin with the presupposition that member ministry somehow holds an exalted position invites the abuse of this concept and tempts pastors to involve lay people who lack necessary qualifications. Rather, let the pastor rejoice if the Lord has blessed his congregation with a mature individual who possesses confidence in the Word of God, a willingness to study it thoroughly, an ability to apply law and gospel in the proper way, and a humble personality which allows him to interact well with adults. Let the pastor encourage this man to continue his studies, use him for the benefit of children and youth, and then, with the

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<sup>10</sup> Nass, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> CAD questionnaire, p. 19.



man's qualifications tried and tested, train him to teach several classes. It seems to me that it might have been wiser, for instance, had the promotional materials for *Training Christians for Ministry* suggested that the courses were for use by pastors and not included directives that the courses were intended to be eventually member-led. I believe pastors who not only understand that teachers of adults require necessary qualifications but also that the public ministry allows for a variety of positions would have sought out the assistance of member ministers where and when they became available in a congregation.

It has not been a part of our history to force men into the pastoral ministry without adequate training and experience, even when there was much work to do. We did hurry along some elementary school teachers during the 1950s, and it could be established that it took many years to overcome the disadvantages of that decision. To be given a qualified member teacher and to not use him or her in the public ministry is poor stewardship of God's gifts. To involve member ministers before they are ready and prepared for ministry is poor stewardship of God's Word. Poor stewardship in either case hinders the cause of parish education. Let us work to find the balance in this area.

#### **D. Small Group Bible Study**

Much of the material this essay presents on small group Bible study is drawn from a white paper the essayist recently prepared for the Board for Parish Services. The paper was presented to the Board, its administrators, the editors of Northwestern Publishing House, and the members of the Family Ministry Task Force on April 14 of this year. Not all the material from that paper is included here. The assignment asked for specific recommendations, and these are still being studied by the proper commissions.

In an effort to solicit specific information and pastoral opinions, I prepared a rather detailed questionnaire and sent copies to 25 WELS pastors. The responses to these questionnaires were excellent.

#### **A Definition of Small Group Bible Study**

As most people define it, a small group Bible study is not the same thing as a small class conducted by a pastor. The small group concept is anchored in the idea of lay leadership and participation.

Some contend that a small group Bible study definition ought to include mention of a methodology many small groups have in common. This methodology involves a great deal of group activity and interaction. It calls for the sharing of ideas and reactions. It takes advantage of sociological dynamics which are present in any small group. The definition proposed here does not include methodology. Later I will contend that some common small group methods ought not be a part of WELS small groups. Let it be said at this point that good teaching methods are important at every Bible class or study, whether the group is large or small.

The definition below also includes concepts of congregational and pastoral oversight. Not all small groups are governed by such procedures. The rationale for these suggestions will be brought later in the essay.

With the above comments in mind, consider the following definition for small group Bible study:

A small group Bible study is a Bible study carried out by a group of between 6 and 12 Christians meeting at a member's home or at another location.

A small group Bible study is a Bible study at which the congregation's pastor is not regularly present.

A small group Bible study is part of a Bible study program which has been activated and is overseen by the congregation's Board of Education (or Elders).

A small group Bible study has members and a leader chosen with significant input by the congregation's pastor and Board of Education.

A small group Bible study has a leader who regularly attends training sessions with the pastor.

### **Advantages of Small Group Bible Study**

It stands to reason that a church body which is as Bible-loving as the WELS but which sees less than 13% of its adult members involved in regular Bible study would be intrigued by the small group concept. One is obligated to ask, "What do small groups offer that cannot be found in the pastor's Bible classes?"

One needs not look far or long for a glowing list of advantages which can accrue to the church through small groups. One needs simply to read the promotional materials which are appended to many small group studies. Perhaps those most committed to the small group concept are less able to articulate the benefits of the method than those who stand farther away. The following is a listing of advantages gleaned from the questionnaires:

Small group study makes it possible for more people to become involved in discussion and application of Bible truths.

Small group study recognizes that not all people learn best in formal educational settings.

Small group study seems to remove barriers which tend to keep people from identifying personal difficulties and problems as well as from making and sharing personal applications of a Bible truth.

Small group study affords an opportunity for people to gain a more personal ownership of Bible truth because they are obligated by group dynamics to participate in the small group discussion.

Small group study allows for targeting Bible study to more specific groups in the congregation (young marrieds, singles, etc.).

Small group study gives people an opportunity to develop the gift of teaching and sharing the Word.

Small group study allows lay people to see that the victories of the gospel do not depend on the presence of the pastor but on the presence of the Word.

Small group study encourages participants to view the life of faith as a whole life matter, rather than a “church-life” or “Sunday-life” issue.

Small group study provides the context in which to develop a caring, interactive community of believers who work at growing in their ability to give personal support and encouragement.

Especially in larger congregations, small groups may offer fellowship with other like minded couples or individuals. It is often difficult in large congregations to identify those with whom there may be an affinity.

Some small groups might offer opportunities for service which other congregational organizations do not highlight (e.g., child care).

Small group study provides another side-door entry into the congregation, thus becoming an evangelism tool.

In a congregation with limited facilities, small group study makes it possible for more classes to meet simultaneously.

Small group study frees the pastor to be able to focus on other aspects of ministry.

Small group Bible study can supplement and complement the pastor’s Bible classes.

The list of advantages almost takes one’s breath away! Wouldn’t it be wonderful if these advantages could actually be realized in our congregations? What a blessing this would be for the WELS! It seems obvious that Small Group Bible Study may bring untold blessings to the congregations and members of the WELS.

### **Concerns About Small Group Bible Study**

Despite these advantages, however, not all respondents to my questionnaire were positive in their reaction to small group Bible study. The same is true of the survey conducted by the CAD. The men who wrote negatively about small group study are likely representative of other pastors in the WELS who are not only reluctant to attempt such a program, but actually consider a small group program in a congregation to be a dangerous signal. More than a few are convinced that the contemporary emphasis on small group study signals a return to the conventicles of Pietism, those infamous *collegia pietatis* (gatherings of the pious) or *ecclesiola in ecclesia* (churches within the church) which brought disaster to the Lutheran churches of 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany. One respondent wrote, “You stand next to a fire and your clothes smell like it.” Another added, “If you mix the same ingredients used by the Pietists, do you really expect to come up with a different kind of cake?” A third wrote:

While I think that small group studies can work, there is an anxious part of me that sees history as a predictor of events...I would never deny that the small group program can work effectively (because our Lord works effectively where his

Word is present), but a part of me will probably always be anxious about the small group program.

Are these concerns legitimate? In order to answer that very important question we will attempt a short review of the small group ministry fostered by Pietism.

The classic case study is found in the ministry of Philipp Jacob Spener (1635-1705). Spener was raised in an orthodox Lutheran home and was encouraged in his Christian upbringing by pious parents and grandparents. Regular family reading included Johann Arndt's *True Christianity* and devotional readings by English Separatists. He began his university training in Strasbourg and eventually developed a deep interest in the biblical languages and the writings of Luther. He seems to have intended to pursue a career as a theological professor.

At the age of 31 Spener was called to be senior pastor in Frankfurt. From the start he preached against formalism and all unspiritual reliance upon orthodox standards. He cautioned his members against Phariseism which he felt could be observed in any feeling that holding right doctrine, participating in the divine service and the sacraments, and avoiding scandalous sins were tantamount to genuine Christian faith. In 1675 he published *Pia Desideria* in which he set down his hopes and dreams for the true Lutheran Church. Among the changes he suggested were the following:

Thought should be given to more extensive use of the Word of God.

Attention should be given to the establishment and diligent exercise of the universal priesthood of all believers.

Christian faith must be put into action, for it is by no means enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith, for Christianity consists rather of practice.

More gentleness and love should be practiced among denominations in polemics.

In the schools and universities attention must be given to the moral development and moral training of future pastors.

Ministerial students should be taught to preach sermons aimed at the heart and directed toward the life of their hearers.

Spener's suggestions were favorably received by many Lutherans in Germany. When viewed in their historical context, it becomes easy to understand why Spener suggested what he did. His emphases were surely a necessary tempering of orthodox excesses in Lutheran Germany.

Five years before Spener published *Pia Desideria*, he began to gather like-minded lay-people in his home for Bible study and prayer. These were the so-called conventicles or *collegia pietatis*. The concept was not original with Spener. Martin Bucer had suggested the small group format in Strasbourg a century before. But Spener was determined to make the idea work. He hoped that these small gatherings of Christians who were committed to his efforts to revitalize Lutheranism could help the cause by becoming a wholesome influence on the rest of the congregation.

Unfortunately, the idea did not work. Almost from the start the conventicles were separatistic, Pharisaical, and opposed to the ministry of the parish pastor. Although Spener tried to reclaim control of the small groups, he eventually was forced to break with them and even speak against them. By the time he ended his ministry in Frankfurt (1686) “he was seriously questioning the value of introducing such meetings and consequently established no more conventicles in his own ministry in either Dresden or Berlin.”<sup>12</sup>

The misguided theological emphases which Spener advanced in Frankfurt and which blossomed in his small groups eventually gave birth to a whole series of false teachings. The Lutheran emphasis on the objective truths of the Scriptures was lost, personal experience took its place, and the means of grace were downplayed. Eventually Pietism removed all vestiges of orthodox Lutheranism: the sacraments, the Confessions, the liturgy, and the Christ-centered hymnody. All this paved the way for Rationalism. In another essay I wrote: “Rationalism is what finally killed the Lutheran Church in Germany, but Pietism is what indicted the stab wound to the Lutheran heart.”

The story of Lutheran Pietism and its conventicles is well-known in WELS circles. There are, however, a few contemporary disasters which are also well-known, and these disasters took place in the WELS. One congregation in Minnesota and another in Michigan struggled with problems in the 1970s which occurred as a direct result of small groups. 17 families were suspended from the Minnesota congregation after they began to embrace and then promulgate false teaching. Their small groups were using materials prepared by Campus Crusade for Christ. Half a dozen members, including several teachers from the local Lutheran high school, left the Michigan parish. The Michigan case led one of our pastors to compose a stern article for *The Lutheran Educator* denouncing the small group concept.<sup>13</sup>

In his article Pastor Braun made it very clear that he was not concerned about the small group format per se, but with small groups that were formed apart from the impetus and without the guidance of the congregation. That line of thinking was often advanced in my questionnaire as well. When I asked whether the problems of Pietism could be avoided, many respondents answered that the problems could be avoided if the small groups were established and guided in the right way. Concerns about small groups held by many of our pastors seem able to be moderated, therefore, if we can find procedures which will help us avoid the errors which crept into the small groups connected with Pietism.

### **Pitfalls of the Pietistic Small Groups**

One is able to identify a number of problems in the Pietistic Bible cells and, although I do not know as much about the small groups in the Minnesota and Michigan congregations, these same problems seem to have existed in those cases, too.

Many conventicles were begun in Germany because of dissatisfaction with the local orthodox pastor. Many pastors were thought to be too wooden, both in doctrine and in communication, and too autocratic. While there was some justification for the complaints, much opposition came about because overly pious church members failed to understand the relationship of faith and the means of grace. Since the conventicles were

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<sup>12</sup> Brown, Dale. *Understanding Pietism*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1978), p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Braun, Mark. “Bible Cells?” *The Lutheran Educator*, February, 1980.

begun in opposition to the pastor, it is obvious that the pastor was not welcomed to exercise theological oversight and control in the small group.

In general, Lutheran Pietists were dissatisfied with church life, and especially with the orderliness of the public ministry. Again, there were some good reasons for their dissatisfaction. The territorial churches of the 17<sup>th</sup> century operated under the strict control of the consistory (i.e., the prince's sometimes-religious, often political church administrator). The lay people had little part in the decisions concerning their pastors. Frankly, some pastors were simply not good pastors despite their divine calls. The orderliness of the divine call was maligned, therefore, and many lay people, with nothing more than an "inner call," took up positions of leadership in the conventicles.

Spener and his followers took note of the sad state of affairs in Lutheran Germany after the Thirty Years War. Religious education had been almost non-existent in many provinces, and unendurably large congregations made pastoral discipline almost impossible. It seemed a farce to Spener that notably impious church members could be regularly absolved and communed. These observations led him to a theological emphasis which asserted that the forgiveness of sins offered in the gospel became effective only when it was accepted by a Christian who made an honest and obvious change in his lifestyle. His emphasis turned away from the objectivity of God's free declaration of forgiveness toward the necessity of a subjective response on the part of the Christian.

In the Lutheran Church the Pietists directed the alarmed sinner not to the Word and the sacraments, but to his own prayers and wrestlings with God in order that he might win his way into a state of grace. They also instructed the believer to base his assurance of grace not on the objective promise of the gospel, but on the right quality of his contrition and faith and on his feeling of grace.<sup>14</sup>

This theological subjectivism blossomed in the conventicles. Despite Spener's stated devotion to a study of the Bible, the conventicles were more often "proving grounds" for conversion and rebirth. This religious empiricism fostered a dangerous emotionalism. Prayer in the conventicles became a means by which one gained faith rather than a fruit of faith.

It must be noted that Spener's primary objective in forming the conventicles was to encourage sanctification both within the cell itself and then, through the cell, in the congregation. Whatever possibilities existed for the accomplishment of this objective were destroyed when the focus of the cells moved away from that which prompts sanctification, i.e., the means of grace. Without the means of grace the conventicles became little more than cells of self-righteous individuals who spent as much time deprecating the unrighteous in the local congregation as they did rejoicing in their own righteousness.

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<sup>14</sup> Mueller, John T. *Christian Dogmatics*. (St. Louis: Concordia), pp. 455-456.

It must be said that while they may be beneficial in many ways, small groups have brought disaster to churches when they have not been properly organized and controlled.

### **Necessary emphases in WELS Small Group Bible Study**

A decided majority of respondents to the questionnaire felt that the abuses could be avoided by a careful structuring of the small groups. They noted that my definition of small group Bible study seemed to eliminate or at least minimize the possibility of problems. The three points which were in the minds of most were:

*A small group Bible study needs to be part of a Bible study program which has been activated and is overseen by the congregation's Board of Education (or Elders). In other words, the impetus for the small group program comes from the body of believers through its appointed leaders. The small group dare not be born out of a reaction against an ineffective or unpopular pastor. The small group cannot have as its focus a disagreement with the public doctrine of the congregation and its synod.*

*A small group Bible study needs to have members and a leader who are chosen with significant input by the congregation's pastor and Board of Education. The small group program must exist within the context of the public ministry of the congregation. Leaders must be representative ministers, i.e., individuals who meet certain qualifications and are called (appointed) to serve as leaders.*

*A small group Bible study must have a leader who regularly attends training sessions with the pastor. The small group needs to exist as an extension of the pastor's teaching office. The pastor, therefore, retains oversight of the ministry. Leaders seek to fine-tune their leadership qualities and understanding of the doctrines of the Scriptures under the direction of the called pastor.*

Several additional points might be added:

In an effort to avoid the problems of cliquishness and Phariseism, it is probably wise that the membership of individual small groups change from time to time.

It is imperative that the materials which are studied by the small group be on the one hand easy to understand and use, and on the other hand free of non-Lutheran teachings and/or emphases. While a side effect of the small group might be growth in the Christian life or the development of friendships, the primary objective ought to be study of the objective truths of the Bible.

The pastor must be a regular and obvious part of the small group program in the same way he is a regular and obvious part of the congregation's Sunday School program. There

must be no thought that a program begun successfully will remain successful without the continuing oversight of the pastor.

There was general consensus in the questionnaires that small groups could serve best in a congregation if they operated under the guidelines listed here. Prof. Arnold Koelpin offered a precise summary when he wrote:

The German “pietists” were a reaction to a sterile state church environment and to a message that had become excessively defensive and ossified because of the political and territorial imperatives. Hence the strong tendency of many German “pietists” was to be anti-clerical. If the clergy today, as called servants, not merely sponsor small group study, but guide them with the understanding of the level at which they operate and the way in which the program integrates into the total program of the congregation, the safeguards will be there – to the extent that we can safeguard against the devil’s wiles in any operation. The congregation’s supervision should be able to avoid creating an *ecclesiola in ecclesia* by its orderliness. In such a case the anticlericism of the “pietists” is not likely, or less likely, to surface.

### **Will the WELS Be Able to Carry Out These Guidelines?**

We seem to have reached the end of the discussion. Yes, there are great benefits which can be derived from small group Bible study. Despite the abuses which have occasionally accrued to small groups in history, we seemingly can find ways to avoid a repetition of those abuses. We will work to develop good materials and careful procedures for the formation and maintenance of the small group concept. A recent issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* contained an essay by my colleague David Kuske on the subject of small group Bible study delivered at this institute last year.<sup>15</sup> In the article Prof. Kuske offered good reasons for establishing such a program and offered a set of guidelines to help keep the program on track. Those who have read his article will note much that is similar to what has been offered in these paragraphs.

Listen, however, to a few voices that wonder if our procedures and guidelines are really viable and practical:

I wouldn’t go so far as some who overstate their case and say that small group studies are the brain child of Reformed theologians and anyone who would use them has been brought into their thinking. Honestly, I see the whole concept as something that looks good on paper and can be good, but in reality is too unwieldy a monster to control.

I think your definition is optimistic; the kind of oversight it envisions is exactly the kind of oversight that the most ardent supporters of such groups want to avoid. If the kind of oversight your definition envisions could be achieved, it would be difficult to maintain. The pastor would need a special level of commitment to the

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<sup>15</sup> Kuske, David P. “Home Bible Study Groups in the 90s.” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 91, No. 2, Spring 1994, pp. 126-131.



success of the process and be willing to invest the time and patience necessary for it to be done properly.

The system you envision is an organization nightmare!

What reverberates in those words is a deep concern that the safeguards which all have agreed are vital for a sound and spiritually successful small group program are going to be difficult if not impossible to achieve.

We are obligated to ask: Are these concerns valid?

### **Concerning the Selection of Leaders**

In every leader's guide produced by WELS advocates of small group studies one finds detailed lists of qualifications for leaders. Two such lists have been appended at the end of this essay.

Although those who suggest these kinds of qualifications have done more study in the area of small group Bible study than perhaps anyone else in our synod, let us suppose for a moment that their lists of qualifications are a little ambitious. Even if we removed 50% of their required qualifications, however, where are we going to find such lay people in our congregations? The CAD survey mentioned earlier contains dozens of comments similar to these:

Gifted lay people who are doctrinally sound, spiritually mature, and willingly available are not abundantly found.

I don't have lay people here who are interested in conducting Bible studies for other adults.

Lay-led Bible study is fine, but it's not always easy to find lay people who are both capable and willing to expend the time and effort needed to do it effectively.

We are in a rock-and-a-hard-place situation here. In order to find lay leaders, we must reduce the list of qualifications. In order to retain confessional and scriptural stability we must increase qualifications.

One wonders how realistic it is to think that most pastors will be able to find an adequate supply of qualified lay leaders to maintain a confessional small group program on a synodical level. When reports come to us from the editors of *Parish Leadership* and the *Northwestern Lutheran* that our lay people want these periodicals to be simpler and easier to read, we cannot help but ask if we are realistic in supposing that we have the number of lay folks we need for a synodical small group Bible study emphasis.

### **Concerning Pastoral Supervision**

Will pastors who begin a program of small group studies actually be able to continue the kind of oversight which is necessary for the program to be spiritually valuable? Spener discovered quickly that he was not able to sustain oversight. One respondent to my questionnaire wrote:

I know of a certain pastor who got such a program going pretty much according to definition, but without his “sitting on it,” it kept wandering in the wrong direction. There were all kinds of problems. One of the problems was that the leader wasn’t able to keep at it but the group still wanted to meet. The pastor gave them the materials, but no one was assigned to be leader. One lady had a management position in her job and “picked up the ball.” One day a member of the study group invited a friend who happened to be a member at another church. The visitor reported back to his pastor what happened and suddenly it appeared in *Christian News* that this church had a female Bible Class leader. Finally the associate pastor had to step in and take the heat from the other pastor and the members and insist that the class be stopped until it could be done better.

The pastor’s schedule is impossible already. Pastors are finding it difficult to keep their language skills alive, their sermons crafted well, their catechism lessons planned to include student participation, their marriage counseling sessions followed up on, their Bible classes prepared, their evangelism calls made, their Sunday School teachers taught, etc. I can envision a pastor beginning a small group program with a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment. I can also envision a scenario in which the pastor, having set up the program, given the leaders initial training, chosen materials, and selected the groups, will be beset by the other unending tasks of the ministry and will soon leave the small group program in the hands of the lay leaders. This – and I think we have historical documentation for it – is a prelude to disaster.

### **Concerning Theological Subjectivism**

Can small group Bible study in the WELS avoid the subjectivism which destroyed the value of 17<sup>th</sup> century conventicles and which brought eventual disaster to the Lutheran church in Germany? The essay mentioned previously that the key here is to retain a study focus on the objective truths of Scripture. Pastors who completed the questionnaire often agreed. Pastor John Vieths wrote:

We need to be careful that sanctification doesn’t overshadow justification. The studies should be Christ-centered, not, however, with their focus on Christ as example but on Christ as God’s loving sacrifice. I have nothing against Christians developing strong friendships with one another and displaying their love for one another, but this is not a real objective of Bible study. The overriding purpose and objective of the class should be to focus on our relationship with God, not on our relationships with each other.

It is precisely at this point, however, that *Christianity Today* finds problems with the small group concept. In a 1994 article, author Warren Bird commented on the amazing growth of the small group phenomenon. He admits that “the small group movement has been effecting a quiet revolution in American society.”<sup>16</sup> But he adds that the subjectivity of almost all small groups may well become their theological downfall.

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<sup>16</sup> Bird, Warren. “How Small Groups Are Transforming Our Lives.” *Christianity Today*, February 7, 1994, p. 22.

Small groups are not drawing people back to the God of their fathers and mothers. They are dramatically changing the way God is understood. God is now less of an external authority and more of an internal presence. The sacred becomes more personal, but in the process, also becomes more manageable, more serviceable in meeting individual needs, and more a feature of the group process itself.<sup>17</sup>

To be sure, [small groups] encourage people to pray and to think about spiritual truths. Nevertheless, they do little to increase the biblical knowledge of their members. Most of them do not assert the value of denominational traditions. Indeed, many of the groups encourage faith to be subjective and pragmatic. A person may feel that his or her faith has been deepened, but in what way is largely in the eyes of the beholder. Biblical truths may become more meaningful, but the reason is that they calm anxiety and help one make it through the day.<sup>18</sup>

In a 1992 *Christianity Today* article, Walt Russell insisted that such subjectivism must come to an end:

We must establish the original historical and literary context of biblical passages. Once this work is done, then we can move to determining the needs a passage addresses. But the text, not our concerns, initially determines the focus. To ignore the necessity of this task is to risk sliding into relativism. We find few contextual safeguards in this land of “what-it-means-to-me” and probably very little of God’s voice.<sup>19</sup>

Again and again pastors observe how society’s attitudes affect the members of their congregations. Our women are troubled by society’s concepts of women’s liberation. Our teens are troubled by society’s quest for instant gratification. Is it unrealistic to suppose that our small groups may well be troubled by the subjectivism which pervades the immense network of small groups in our country? Is it an absurd scenario to suppose a pious, Bible-loving WELS member comparing small group notes with his pious Bible-loving Assemblies of God neighbor and concluding that the Assemblies of God small group procedures are far more interesting and relevant than the Lutheran small group methods? When even *Christianity Today*, the mouthpiece of American experiential theology, expresses concerns about religious relativism and spiritual subjectivism and calls them part and parcel of the small group phenomenon, ought not the WELS think twice before jumping into the small group pool with both feet? When the entire small group world seems to be moving toward a “what-does-God-mean-to-me?” approach to Scripture, is it realistic to suppose that WELS small groups can maintain a “Christ-has-done-this-for-me” emphasis?

There are some in our circles who sense that instances of theological subjectivity and an unhealthy emphasis on sanctification can be found not only around us but also within us. In an essay prepared for the celebration of the Seminary’s 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Prof. Paul Eickmann wrote:

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<sup>17</sup> Bird, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Bird, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> Russell, Walt. “What It Means to Me.” *Christianity Today*, October 26, 1992, p. 32.

In an effort to be down-to-earth and practical, it seems to me that some of our newer Seminary graduates preach the law very clearly, but with sanctification of the church in view ...They may feel that the preaching they themselves have heard from my generation did not do full justice to the important place of sanctification.<sup>20</sup>

The question raised at the beginning of this section – Can small group Bible study in the WELS avoid the subjectivism which destroyed the value of 17<sup>th</sup> century conventicles and which brought eventual disaster to the Lutheran Church in Germany? – cannot really be answered at this time and place. But the question must continue to be asked before we rush headlong into this adult education concept.

### **Concerning the Pastor's Role as Teacher in the Congregation**

There are additional concerns which could be raised: Will an emphasis on small group Bible study allow our church body to retain the Reformation emphasis on the role of the pastor as teacher? The questionnaire asked:

As you consider an entire program of Christian education for adults in your congregation, where does a small group program fit as to priority compared to:

the pastor's weekly Bible classes(es)?

pastoral visitation of members?

an elective system of Bible classes in which teaching assistance is afforded by using laymen or staff ministers and/or LES teachers?

The respondents indicated almost unanimously that the pastor's Bible class was the most important element of a congregation's program of adult education. Prof. Mark Braun wrote:

Small groups should not be promoted as a replacement for a strong teaching, preaching and serving ministry of the pastor in the congregation. If we fail to do our job in the congregation as a whole, pietism will develop whether we initiate small groups or not.

The question about retaining an emphasis on the pastoral teaching office is another which cannot be answered now. However, there are some discouraging signs. One WELS small group manual asserts: "Everyone, through personal experience and unique biblical insights, can teach everyone else," and "The gifts of leadership, teaching, shepherding, and administration are not limited to the called staff of our churches."

Finally, it is not illegitimate to ask this question about a small group program: "If we have them, will they come?" More than a few of the respondents to the CAD survey and several who answered my questionnaire doubt there will be much congregation interest in small group Bible study. In the opinion of more than one, those who do attend will be the ones who are already enrolled in the pastor's classes and who already are growing in faith and love.

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<sup>20</sup> Eickmann, Paul E. "Sola Fide." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 86, No. 3, Summer 1989, pp. 187-188.

It is interesting to note that a recent *Barna Report* indicates seeming change in the national mood over small group Bible study.

The current study indicates that small groups may have failed to live up to their promise for many people. One out of four adults was involved in a small group in 1991 and 1992. The most recent figures show a decline to just 16% who are involved in a small group that meets for Bible study, prayer, or Christian fellowship.<sup>21</sup>

What seemed to some to be a new movement in Christianity may turn out to be nothing more than a passing societal trend.

### **False Claims for Small Group Bible Study**

In my judgment small group Bible study holds as many disadvantages as benefits, as many liabilities as assets. I realize this view will not be popular with everyone in our synod. In fact, one almost senses a reluctance in some quarters to see anything wrong with the small group idea. There seems to be a growing interest in small groups and an increasing perception that such a methodology may be long overdue in our synod.

One wonders if some of the determination for and commitment to small group methodology is not born in claims which are made about small group study. For instance:

There is a long history of small group home Bible studies in the Christian church, beginning with Jesus himself.

That model was continued by the disciples.

Of all the potential ministry formats available to the local church, small groups have the greatest biblical support.

The fact that believers met together every day suggests that small groups can produce great commitment.

Nowhere else in the Bible does God tell us of a time when the church grew more rapidly than when they were meeting in small groups.

Growth will be a natural event in an active and fulfilling group. Each member of the original group will spread the word by modeling a renewed spirit and also by simply sharing with others the potential spiritual power these groups possess.

The setting tends to promote true Christian sharing and fellowship.

I contend there are a number of errors in those claims.

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<sup>21</sup> Barna, George. "Absolute Confusion." *The Barna Report*, Volume 3, 1993-94, (Regal Books, 1993) p. 64.

To accept the contemporary definition of a small group, i.e., a group of Christians meeting under the leadership of a lay person, and then to call the apostles the first small group and Jesus the first small group leader, is ridiculous. If he was anything, Jesus was a seminary professor; the twelve disciples were seminary students. To say that those 13 who traveled the hills and valleys of Palestine were nothing more than a small group Bible study is like saying that filet mignon is nothing more than pre-ground hamburger.

It is just as difficult exegetically to associate the New Testament “house” references with today’s small group Bible studies. Even if such a pattern could be established, these references are considered by Lutherans to be descriptive and not prescriptive for the New Testament church. It is the Reformed, with their prescriptive understanding of biblical patterns and customs, which make much of these kinds of passages.

I see again and again in the small group literature a confusion of methods and means. Too often the small group method is given credit for what only the means of grace can effect. It must also be said that literally every Christian life objective desired as a by-product of small group methodology can be and often is prompted by the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace in various ministry formats. Claims for the superior efficacy of one or another method come straight out of anti-means of grace theology of the Reformed. Charles Finney insisted, for example, that “conversion has nothing to do with a miracle but with the proper use of methods at the proper time.” It is true, of course, that the small group format allows for some group dynamics which a large group class cannot match. Small group advocates need to be careful not to confuse fruits of faith which only the gospel can prompt and psychological objectives which occur by means of group dynamics.

Too often, I fear, advocates of small group Bible study methods overlook and ignore legitimate warnings because they have been fooled by claims made about and for small group study which in reality are false.

When we come to the issue of small group Bible study we are not talking about biblical rights and wrongs when we speak about whether or not to promote or employ small group Bible study. This is a matter of wisdom, not of law. I become mighty uncomfortable when I hear WELS pastors mightily lambasting the small group concept. A commentator whose opinion I respect wrote:

This laxity [in the small groups] afforded Spener’s opponents a ground of attack, but their unskillful, superficial, and impassioned onslaughts not only lightened Spener’s task of defense and substantiation, but also, unfortunately, helped to obscure his perception of the real consequences of his position.<sup>22</sup>

I become just as uncomfortable, however, when I hear voices insisting that congregations cannot get along without small group study.

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<sup>22</sup> Gruenberg in “Pietism.” *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. IX, p. 56.

## **Conclusion**

The decisions concerning staffing in parish education that are made by the pastors and leaders in our churches and synod need to be made carefully, lovingly, and surely without acrimony.

There needs to be among us a degree of mature creativity and a determination that nothing benefits the believer more than Word and sacraments. It is a wise axiom that, “The value of any activity in a congregation is directly proportional to its proximity to the Word.” Decisions also need to be made, however, without naïveté and shortsightedness. The goal of more Christians studying the Scriptures is a noble goal, but it is not a more important goal than holding to the Scriptures. May it never be said that we achieved the former at the expense of the latter. May God give us wisdom.

## **Qualifications for Leaders of Small Groups**

### **Character**

1. A movement toward the qualities in 1 Timothy 3:1-7
2. Spiritual maturity
3. Not afraid to confront others
4. Can discern God's will and solve problems
5. Have the attitude of a servant
6. Places the kingdom of God as life's priority
7. Motivated for leadership to:
  - a. glorify God
  - b. please God
  - c. love and serve God
  - d. advance the kingdom
  - e. love and serve others

### **Behavior**

1. Teachable, not defensive
2. Walk in forgiveness and integrity in personal relationships
3. Enthusiastic
4. Consistent in prayer and devotional life
5. They exhibit the fruits of the Spirit

### **Commitment**

1. to God
2. to marriage and family (if they have one)
3. to ministry (and the specific plan of this church)

### **Commitment to God**

1. Pursuing a vital relationship to God
2. Not a new convert
3. They have a growing relationship with Jesus Christ
4. Zealous to serve the Lord and give him glory

### **Commitment to Marriage and Family**

1. Pursuing a time of ministry and prayer with the family
2. Respected by their spouse
3. Manage the family well
4. Children under control

### **Commitment to Ministry**

1. Willing to lead a small group
2. Willing to share the church's vision with the group
3. Committed to and have a desire to help others grow in their Christian faith
4. Willing to pray regularly for their group
5. Committed to the purpose and agenda of the small group ministry



## **Qualifications for Leaders of Small Groups**

Don't feel that you have to know all the answers...you're there to learn, too.

Be regular in your Sunday worship and Bible Class attendance so you'll continue to grow spiritually.

Consider attending your pastor's adult instruction class.

Regularly pray for God's guidance for yourself as a leader.

Regularly pray for each individual in your group, by name.

Faithfully and thoroughly prepare your materials before each session. Being well-prepared for a meeting will take several hours. (If you aren't ready to make a major commitment to this, you're not ready to be a leader.)

Visit your group members when they are celebrating, hospitalized, etc.

Study this Leader's Handbook regularly in its entirety every time you begin a new series with your group.

Look for people in your group who have leadership potential and train them to lead.

Delegate whatever you can.

Be ready to "open up." Leaders need to be transparent enough to demonstrate that they are human also, with the same fears, temptations, and weaknesses as everyone else in the group. Don't be afraid to "let your guard down."

Confidential matters should not be discussed with anyone outside the group, not even spouses.

Be understanding [of the people in your group and] quickly learn to "read between the lines."

Refuse to be drawn into something that is beyond the scope of your group.

Learn to care for people as you would expect your pastor to.

# Issues in Parish Education

## Part III: Funding Parish Education

*By James Tiefel*

### A. Money in the Ministry of the Gospel

“Money, money, money, that’s all we ever talk about in this church. I am sick and tired of hearing and thinking about money.” Practically every called worker has heard or said those comments. It does get tiring always relating the church to money. We are not here to raise money but to spread the gospel. So why another presentation on money?<sup>23</sup>

One cannot blame the beleaguered Lutheran elementary school principal for voicing his frustrations. His choice of vocations, his education, his observations as teacher and principal, to say nothing of his knowledge of the troubles in the homes of the congregation he serves have led him to the conclusion that the educational ministry he oversees is essential and perhaps even indispensable. But at the very same time he has become convinced of the value of his ministry, he finds it increasingly difficult and sometimes impossible to carry out the ministry because of the limitations of money.

He is not alone in his frustrations. The presidents and principals of our synodical schools and our area Lutheran high schools feel the same futility and disappointment. So do many parish pastors. All of these realize that there are so many educational needs. All understand that there are so many educational possibilities. But all are honest enough to admit that there is so little educational expansion because there is not enough educational funding.

No one should suppose that this frustration exists only in situations where there is a Lutheran elementary or secondary school, although the frustration in those places is often acute. It also exists in every parish where member needs are obvious, where educational possibilities exist, and where money is not available to meet the needs and fund the possibilities.

The truth is, ministry does not require money. A lot of public ministry is done without money, and the personal service that is performed by individual believers for the sake of other believers exists without the exchange of money. The early church did most of its ministry without money; Paul even refused to accept money as payment for ministry (2 Corinthians 11). The church can get itself too caught up with money if it begins to wring its collective hands, concluding that nothing can be done when there is no money.

The benefit of money is that it allows the church to minister in an organized and efficient way. Pastors, teachers, and staff ministers could conduct ministry without pay; they could hold jobs in society as thousands of gospel ministers have done through the centuries. Their service becomes more efficient, however, when the church assumes the burden of personal support and allows them to give themselves full-time to the public ministry. We would not need buildings – the early church worshiped and studied in homes – but buildings allow the church to teach many people at once. We would not need textbooks, typewriters, or copy machines; we could commit the Scriptures to memory. But books and modern technology help the church to communicate the gospel quickly and easily. We would not need to offer secular education. Jesus has

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<sup>23</sup> Schafer, Stephen F. “Funding the Parish School.” *The Lutheran Educator*, Vol. 33, No. 1, October 1992, p. 4.

commissioned the church to teach people to follow whatever he has commanded; science and math are a part of what he created, but not a part of what he commanded. We teach secular subjects to impart more efficiently the truth that all of learning as well as all of life is caught up in God's plan to save.

It benefits nothing and no one, therefore, if we ignore the issue of money. Money, the ability to gain it and the opportunities to spend it in ministry, are gifts of God as surely as the sun and the stars. In the same way that we work and study to harness the power of the sun and to calculate the position of the stars for the sake of improving life on this planet, so we work and study so that we might be able to harness the power of money and calculate how it works for the benefit of the gospel. Jesus did not hesitate to speak about the use of money – its proper use and its improper use. We are wise to follow his example.

## **B. The Funds Needed for Parish Education**

We mentioned at the beginning of this essay that funding issues are applicable in all congregations, in those with and those without elementary and secondary schools to support. It is true, of course, that congregations which support full-time educational agencies feel the funding issues more acutely.

It was exactly that reality that led to a series of meetings attended by Milwaukee-area representatives of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and WELS school officials from the Southeastern Wisconsin District in early 1991. Meeting with the staff of Meitler Consultants of Milwaukee, the administrators found that schools in their areas were facing almost identical challenges and problems. On the basis of 3,662 survey responses and eleven focus group interviews, the consultants supported trends which had been observed by school administrators.

Part of the study concerned costs at the elementary and secondary level. The findings indicated that:

Cost increases in Lutheran schools are rising faster than the rate of inflation, particularly because congregations and conferences are trying to raise teachers' salaries which have been historically low.<sup>24</sup>

The consultants suggested:

Congregations should anticipate that school costs will increase faster than the cost of living in future years. Reasons for higher cost increases are the need to increase teachers' salaries, the need to expand programs and employ a wider range of staff, the need to offer a more competitive program in the middle grades, etc.<sup>25</sup>

The study also revealed that a majority of Milwaukee-area Lutherans considered these increased school costs to be the single greatest threat to full-time Christian education.<sup>26</sup>

The interesting observation about rising costs in elementary and secondary education is this: in many cases expenses are rising because schools are feeling the demand from parents to offer better and expanded programs. The study indicated that both WELS and LCMS members

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<sup>24</sup> Meitler Consultants, Inc., Attitudes About Lutheran Schools: Joint Study of LCMS and WELS Schools in Southeast Wisconsin, Summary Report, December 1992, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Meitler, p. 52.

<sup>26</sup> Meitler, p. 22.

felt that the Lutheran elementary school should receive the highest priority for parish funding after worship. (But pastors ranked the LES in 5<sup>th</sup> place.)<sup>27</sup> In fact, there is some concern that Lutheran parents may not continue to be willing to send their children to the Lutheran elementary school unless the school is able to imitate at least part of what the public system offers by way of special programs. The Meitler report includes a page of proposals that it suggests will help to keep students enrolled and attract new students. Almost all of the suggestions involve expending more money.

None of the new programs and/or teaching methods suggested by Meitler or encouraged even by the education departments at Dr. Martin Luther College and the Seminary are without merit. Basic principles of pedagogy require some tools that cost money. That the best learning occurs when there is student activity requires low classroom population. Low classroom population may require more classrooms. The observation that students learn best in attractive, well-ventilated learning areas calls for bright and appealing classrooms – and this impacts on the congregation’s Sunday School as much as it does on the Lutheran elementary school. Congregations that cram Sunday School children into church basements – to study the most important truths in life – are obligated to consider adding facilities that encourage optimal learning.

Adult education also demands better facilities. Warren Wilbert suggests that

Adult Christians tend to learn most effectively when their physical and mental capabilities are equal to the task and when they are provided with sufficient time and appropriate facilities.<sup>28</sup>

He encourages congregations to make provision for appropriate sight, sound, and other physical facilities because they are major factors in the success or failure of adult programs. “Quality materials and equipment and sufficient facilities go a long way toward assuring success in education programming.”<sup>29</sup> In an era which so compellingly urges the increase of adult education programs, congregations which allow Bible classes to be held in the nave of the church or in classrooms designed for children need to consider seriously expanding facilities for the sake of adults.

This essay will not return to the issue of staffing for adult education. We have pointed already to the advantages of adding either pastoral staff or staff ministers even in a congregation without a Lutheran elementary school. It is obvious, of course, that increased staffing will require increased funding, to the tune of between \$35,000 and \$50,000 per staff member in salary, housing, and benefits.

“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2). Faithfulness for those serving in the ministry of education includes striving for the best in methods, manpower, and facilities. But the best can cost money. Parish education for children, teens and adults is expensive, and the price tag is going up. Perhaps the price tag should be going up, since it seems obvious that the parish program should be improving and expanding.

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<sup>27</sup> Meitler, p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> Wilbert, Warren. *Strategies for Teaching Adults*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 236.

<sup>29</sup> Wilbert, p. 236.

### C. Funding Parish Education

For almost the entire history of our church body, the primary financial support for the educational ministry of the congregation and the synod came from the regular offerings of church members. A few congregations might have purchased Sunday School materials with children's offerings. There was a time when public fund raisers (e.g., fish fries and rummage sales) dramatically increased the revenues in the parish school's treasury, but that era may be passing. In the main, regular offerings have funded almost everything. In 1991, 82% of the funding for WELS elementary schools in the Milwaukee area came from general offerings (compared to 76% in LCMS grade schools). The three WELS Lutheran high schools in the area receive more of their revenues from general congregational offerings than do the Missouri Synod schools (36% at the high end for WELS, 15% at the low end for LCMS).<sup>30</sup> Wisconsin Synod members and pastors seem to be quite comfortable with this procedure. The Meitler study indicated that pastors, LES teachers, parents with school age children, and congregational leaders are all strongly committed to using the congregation's financial resources to insure the viability of the Lutheran elementary school.<sup>31</sup> The study also suggested that "congregational subsidy should continue to be the primary means for funding Lutheran schools."<sup>32</sup>

Here we come to a Catch-22 situation. Parents demand more expensive programs and members feel that child education ought to demand the priorities of the congregation's finances. However, funding is not increasing enough to keep up with costs. The Meitler report indicates that members are not supporting educational programs with more offerings. The report noted:

Many congregations are facing financial struggles. Stewardship programs have failed to keep pace with congregations' financial needs. Congregations seem to find it more difficult to successfully challenge congregation members to respond with biblical stewardship in an increasingly secular society. Consequently, some congregations find it more difficult to fund their Lutheran elementary school and the Lutheran high school.<sup>33</sup>

The drastic decrease in enrollment in Catholic schools in recent years can be attributed in great part to a similar phenomenon. Catholics demanded more than the bread and butter education that poorly-paid nuns were providing in antiquated schools. In order to retain and enroll students, Catholic schools were forced to hire regular teachers and expand programs and facilities. The increased costs drove up the need for funding. The required funding drove down enrollment. Lutheran schools could be facing the same situation in the years ahead.

There are additional indicators that the traditional parish funding approach to education may need to be reassessed. The essay mentioned previously that pastors are not as convinced as members that the parish school and high school deserve the highest priorities in congregational funding. Pastors seem to be more sympathetic toward the work of the church at-large and more aware of the spiritual needs of adults. In both the WELS and the LCMS pastors placed missions and adult education as a higher funding priority than elementary and secondary education.<sup>34</sup> The report noted, therefore:

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<sup>30</sup> Meitler, p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> Meitler, p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> Meitler, p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> Meitler, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Meitler, p. 26.

There is a growing recognition that other areas of congregational ministry which have been given lower priority in the past will need additional resources. If available dollars are limited, there could be competition for funding between these programs and Lutheran elementary and secondary schools.<sup>35</sup>

Congregations are beginning to study seriously alternate ways of funding and supporting their schools and high schools. In the last five years *The Lutheran Educator* has printed at least two major articles on the issue on funding, and both articles have indicated that congregations are wise to begin exploring the possibilities of second and third-source funding for their schools.<sup>36</sup>

### **Member Tuition**

By second-source funding we refer to tuition payments made by parents to the school or congregation. Tuition payments have always been a major source of funding in our area Lutheran high schools, but the idea is relatively new to WELS elementary schools. Missouri Synod schools moved in the tuition direction a number of years ago. Fully 50% of schools that submitted reports to Meitler indicated that they charged tuition. Only 34% of responding WELS school reported that tuition was charged. Of the WELS congregations only one charged more than \$500/student. Of the LCMS congregations, more than half charged more than \$500 in 1991.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, area Lutheran high schools in both synods charged tuition rates that were about the same, the larger schools more than the smaller schools. Recent information indicates that the smaller schools have caught up with the larger schools.

Congregations in our synod have tended to be wary of changing the pattern of congregationally-supported elementary schools. Only 26% of Milwaukee-area pastors favored the idea of parent tuition. Both recent articles in *The Lutheran Educator* raised questions about member tuition. Dr. Plath asked a series of questions:

If a congregation is considering such a policy, thought should be given to several issues. Will a tuition policy for members improve the parents' and other members' attitudes toward the scriptural concept of giving? Will the policy promote a feeling among those who do not have children in the school that they should continue to improve their offerings in order to help support an important nurturing function in the church? Is such a tuition policy an attempt to solve a spiritual problem parents may have? Do spiritual problems exist among others in the congregation besides parents? If so, what is being done to solve those problems in a God-pleasing way?<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps questions and concerns like these are part of the reason why only 14% of WELS school funding (at least in the Meitler poll) comes from parents' tuition payments.

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<sup>35</sup> Meitler, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Schafer, op. cit. and Plath, LeDell. "Funding Lutheran Elementary Schools." *The Lutheran Educator*, Vol. 29, No. 3, February, 1989.

<sup>37</sup> Meitler, p. 24.

<sup>38</sup> Plath, p. 54-55.

Apparently, however, not as many members are thinking about those questions as pastors and teachers are, for WELS members surveyed by the Meitler consultants indicated they felt parents ought to supply about 38% of total school revenues.

A personal survey indicated that WELS congregations that charge tuition have noticed a number of advantages and blessings since the tuition policy began. There was invariably some increase in revenue for the expansion of kingdom work, although a few parents did simply transfer offerings to tuition payments. A tuition policy has tended to remove some of the frustration felt occasionally by non-parents who sometimes sense that the congregation's total ministry program is being limited by the school. Since the parents have more direct interest in school spending, items for special educational needs have been able to be purchased. These items likely would not have been added had the voters assembly had to balance them against the congregation's mission commitments, for example. With their own money directly involved, parents have been more willing to show interest in and concern for the school.

Most congregations with a tuition policy have solved the problem of helping families who find tuition payments to be a difficult if not an impossible burden. Scholarship committees seem to function easily so that no one desiring a Christian education is denied it because of need. We add here that these scholarship committees are also functioning in some congregations on the behalf of students who attend Lutheran high schools. Every congregation has older members who feel strongly about assisting young parents with the Christian education of their children, just as older members helped them when they were young. Experience has shown that these members have given generously to congregational scholarship funds.

This essay does not share the feeling that charging tuition "punishes" parents who are poor givers in the congregation. If the thought of "punishment" becomes a motive for charging tuition, the motive ought to be challenged; Dr. Plath is correct to ask if other "back-sliders" in the congregation are also being "punished." It is true, however, that the non-supportive parents ought to be challenged as well. A tuition policy is a viable congregational policy because the Lutheran elementary and secondary schools are cooperative ventures between parents and churches. The church has been charged to preach the gospel, not to teach reading. The church has been commissioned to make disciples, but disciples are not made by means of basketball and band. When parents desire to have their children learn reading, basketball, and band in the context of the Word of God, biblical morality, and Christian friendships, the church may be willing to lend a hand. It may be willing to train Christian teachers, coaches, and band directors; it may prepare textbooks and programs; it may add organization, administration, and a degree of financial support. But the church itself ought not be obligated to carry the responsibility for full-time education alone. If parents refuse to assume their part of that responsibility, it is likely they are not well-served by the congregation's schools in the first place, for those schools were established to assist a home committed to the gospel. To lose their children for our schools does not seem to be a great loss, since it is not likely we "had" these children in the first place. We must continue to deal with these families, of course, and we can do this through the other educational agencies in the congregation and perhaps also through the Board of Elders.

A benefit that might accrue to Milwaukee-area congregations will also benefit other areas with high WELS populations. In many of these areas, smaller congregations send children to the larger congregation's school. These smaller congregations often feel they must supply full tuition reimbursement to parents if the congregation is going to be able to retain young families with school age children. If the smaller congregation does not pay full tuition, and if the neighboring school offers a "free ride" to all members, the temptation to transfer membership will be very

strong. If the neighboring congregation charges tuition, the members' out-of-pocket payments would be the same in one congregation as in another. In the end, both congregations benefit. The congregation without the school will keep its young members; the congregation with the school will not have to expand its program because of children whose parents joined primarily to get out of tuition payments.

We have not addressed the concerns that a tuition policy may damage congregational stewardship. This subject will receive special treatment at the end of the essay.

### **Non-member Tuition**

Many Missouri Synod congregations and many more Roman Catholic parishes have found a steady source of support by opening their schools to non-members and charging a healthy tuition. Although non-member tuition is not a rarity in the WELS, it seems that policies which seek non-members are not nearly as common in the WELS as in the other two denominations. We have not seen many WELS school bumper stickers or heard many WELS school radio commercials.

The policy to actively seek non-members for the sake of their tuition payments seems to stand in opposition to the primary objective of the Lutheran elementary and secondary school, namely, to assist parents in the Christian nurturing of their children. The Christian school means to offer more than a safe environment, quality education, traditional morality, and caring teachers; it means to offer the Word of life which saves and feeds the soul. When students come to our schools with a family commitment to the public confession of another denomination, we can expect problems. Our religion classes must identify and warn against the false doctrine found in many churches. Children from these churches are often put into embarrassing situations. Our own children, quick to defend friends they feel are being maligned, may be tempted to come to the defense of error for the sake of their friends. Especially older students from another denomination may seek to sway friends to their false confessional position. On the high school level WELS students may become romantically involved with non-WELS students; this is exactly the situation parents hoped to avoid when they sent their child to the Lutheran school. Confusion over fellowship abounds as non-WELS students desire to become chapel organists, choir members, and members of instrumental ensembles that participate in worship.

Where schools allow non-members to attend, it seems logical that non-member parents ought to pay tuition. When the gospel does not have an opportunity to provide motivation for giving, the non-members ought to be motivated in some other way to share the cost. A tuition bill is a powerful motivation.

We question, however, a policy which seeks this tuition by seeking the enrollment of non-members. Whatever revenues are gained by such a policy seem to be offset by the potential problems we have identified above. Despite the additional income, we may be wise to restudy our commitment to the principle that Lutheran education is intended for Lutheran families.

Some justify the invitation of non-WELS families to the school for the sake of evangelism. Such a motive is noble. It seems strange, however, that we would charge a hefty tuition to be able to offer the free gospel! (It might be said at this point that a policy of member tuition might rid us of the problem many congregations have had to endure, that is, families joining the church without a confessional or spiritual commitment simply to rid themselves of tuition payments. If all parents paid the same tuition we might avoid pangs of conscience on both the evangelism and confessional fronts.)



The essay is not suggesting that WELS schools should not allow non-WELS students to attend nor that WELS schools should cease charging tuition of non-members. I served a congregation which allowed non-member students to enroll on a tuition basis, and I saw a few of these families take instructions and become strong, active members. The essay does encourage congregations to conduct an on-going review of these issues lest funding concerns overshadow other important principles.

### **Third Source Funding**

The Meitler report identified another source of funding that seems to interest many WELS members, and this is third source funding. We identify third source funding as monies that can be sought from businesses and foundations that are willing to support educational agencies, for example, Campbell's Soup, Kohl's, the Siebert Foundation, the Aid Association for Lutherans, and Lutheran Brotherhood. Third source funding might also include special gifts and donations made in cash or via insurance policies naming the school as beneficiary. In WELS and LCMS schools in Southeast Wisconsin, these funding sources contribute only 3-4% of total school income. Area Lutherans feel that up to 15% of elementary school expenses and 20% of high school expenses should be funded by third sources. Pastors are less inclined than members to encourage this on the elementary school level, but equally inclined on the high school level.<sup>39</sup>

It is not likely that third sources will ever become major producers of educational revenue, but we ought not overlook this potential assistance to ministry. A school with a \$200,000 annual budget that achieves the 15% goal (as members indicate it should) would be able to give \$30,000 back to the congregation for other ministry uses. That money covers the salary and benefits of a staff minister!

The WELS has long had concerns about seeking monies from outside sources. Some pastors discourage the use of insurance company monies because of fellowship principles. Some prohibit gifts from outside agencies with the argument that non-believers should not support the gospel ministry. While the concerns are valid, we need to be careful of legalism that would disallow what the Scriptures do not forbid and what other brothers and sisters in Christ have been able to use in freedom. On the other hand, the concern that seeking these gifts (as well as promoting fund raising sales and dinners) may harm congregational stewardship is legitimate. As mentioned previously, stewardship issues will be treated at another place in the essay.

### **Government Aid and Assistance**

The issue of governmental aid to our Lutheran schools has been a troubling problem for many years. Ever since Wisconsin's 1889 Bennett Law tried to impose governmental regulations on parochial schools, our synod's leaders have stood firmly against the state's intrusion into Christian education. Careful study of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions as they deal with the role of the state and the church have produced synodical documents that reject any governmental interference and discourage congregations from accepting governmental subsidies. In 1963 the Conference of Presidents issued a statement on federal aid to Christian schools that was endorsed by the synod in convention. The statement concluded:

In carrying out its functions the State may also find it necessary to train and educate, but the State is restricted to its own temporal sphere and should not encroach upon the functions of Christian parents or of the Church in their

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<sup>39</sup> Meitler, p. 30.

God-given responsibility to train the young in things spiritual and relating to God's eternal kingdom.

Therefore, recognizing our God-given responsibility and gladly assuming it, we neither want nor request the assistance of the State in carrying out our educational endeavors. We hold that such assistance invites the intrusion of the State into an area not assigned to it by God, and that such assistance also violates the constitutional principle of separation of Church and State, using tax monies gathered from all citizens for the promulgation of a specific religion or faith.<sup>40</sup> We hold furthermore that we would thereby be yielding to the State the direction and control in the training of our children. The State would be shirking its duty if it were not to determine and to supervise the manner in which its monies are used. We should always cherish the freedom of rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's.<sup>41</sup>

By 1967 it seemed that the 1963 opinion had gone a little too far. The synod convention received two reports from the Advisory Committee on Education (A.C.E.). The first report dealt with the scriptural principles. The summary statement reads:

From the delineation of basic principles we see that there is a wide realm of contacts in church and state relations, which lie in the area of adiaphora and are not themselves necessarily a confusion of church and state.<sup>42</sup>

The Supplementary Statement declares:

Using the A.C.E. adopted study as a basis which carefully delineates the means and functions of both church and state, one would be hard-pressed to state categorically that all government aid per se is wrong or contrary to the clear teachings of Scripture. The fact of the matter is that the government does have a stake in education, particularly in a democratic oriented society. It is necessary for us to study all government aid programs with all their stated implications carefully.<sup>43</sup>

In 1967 our synod also issued the confessional statement *This We Believe*. Since the confession intended to state clearly the basic teachings of our synod particularly as they are opposed to modern theology and ecclesiastical practice in America, the confession included a section on the subject of church and state. While reviewing the scriptural and confessional principles, the section contains two points that are germane to our discussion:

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<sup>40</sup> In an essay delivered to the WELS Commission on Parish Schools (September 25, 1992), Prof. John Brenner questioned this statement. He wrote:

The Conference of Presidents was perhaps unwise in issuing a legal and political opinion "that such assistance violates the constitutional principle of separation of church and state." It is best to leave such things for the courts to decide. But the overriding concern "that such assistance invites the intrusion of the State into an area not assigned to it by God..." is still valid today (p. 10-11).

<sup>41</sup> *WELS Book of Reports and Memorials*, 1963, p. 33-35.

<sup>42</sup> *WELS Proceedings*, 1967, p. 173.

<sup>43</sup> *WELS Proceedings*, 1967, p. 173-174.

On the other hand, the Church and the State may participate in one and the same endeavor as long as each remains within its assigned place and uses its entrusted means.

We reject any attempt on the part of the Church to seek financial assistance of the state in carrying out its saving purpose.<sup>44</sup>

The first of the above paragraphs gives schools the right to accept governmental aid in general. The second paragraph seems to disallow any political or lobbying activity that would attempt to influence the state to change its assistance policies in favor of Lutheran schools. We do not believe this clause means to prohibit schools from seeking assistance which the government already offers (e.g., a letter or phone call to the school district to request information about a busing program).

It is under these 1967 principles that the vast majority of our schools have felt free to accept varying doses of governmental aid over the past 25 years. It is not uncommon for our schools to take advantage of federal and state assistance in food supplies, busing, text books, special education services, scholarships, etc.

During these years it has not seemed that the government has been interested in using this assistance as leverage to force us to change our confessional position or our synodical and congregational policies. While some adjustments have become necessary (for example, beginning the school day with the bus schedule in mind), our schools have not often been pressured by the state. Where there have been pressures, for instance in teacher certification issues or inspections of school facilities, we have followed one of two routes. We either have granted that the state has a right to set certain standards in schools which educate its citizens and have acquiesced to those standards, or we have been the recipients of favorable court action granted to litigants from other denominations.

We mention all this as an introduction to a governmental assistance issue that could have much more of an impact than anything the federal and state governments have done to this point. In recent years many politicians, educators, and concerned citizens have criticized the nation's public school system and have suggested proposals for improvement. Those who espouse the free enterprise system believe that the key to improvement is to open up the public school system to competition. Private foundations in Battle Creek, Michigan, and in Milwaukee are currently providing tuition grants to low income students to enable them to attend private and parochial schools (the latter in Battle Creek only).<sup>45</sup>

A number of states are proposing "educational choice" bills that would give parents the option of sending their children to the school of their choice, whether public or private. Former President George Bush made a federal educational voucher system one of the issues of his 1992 election campaign.

The school choice proposals come in a wide variety of forms. Most of the proposals do not affect parochial schools, but have to do with inter- or intradistrict open enrollment or deal only with non-religious schools. There are a few proposals that involve religious schools and could affect our elementary and secondary schools.

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<sup>44</sup> *This We Believe* (Milwaukee: NPH, 1967), p. 22-23.

<sup>45</sup> Brenner, John M. "Issues Related to Educational Choice." Presented to the WELS Commission on Parish Schools, September 25, 1992.

A national policy is unlikely as long as the Democratic Party controls the White House and the Congress. The Democrats have long favored national teacher organizations, and the teacher organizations violently oppose the educational choice effort. The issue likely will be resurrected if Republicans regain control in either branches of government. No one is able to prophesy how legislation will look once it comes out of committee and withstands debate and compromise. The question is unanswered about how the Supreme Court will treat the matter. Despite these questions, however, Prof. Brenner noted that “many believe that some sort of educational choice legislation involving religious schools will be passed by state legislatures and/or Congress in the near future and will be upheld by the Supreme Court.”<sup>46</sup>

Prof. Brenner reminds us:

We have seen that it is not necessarily wrong for the church to receive financial support from the government for the education of children. Whether it is wise to accept that support depends on a number of factors. We will want to set our political views aside and make our decision on the basis of the pertinent scriptural principles. Our Wisconsin Synod constituency will not be united in their political views and should not be expected to be.

The guidelines for accepting such support as contained in the 1967 synodical resolution are still valid. That resolution urged our schools to avoid state aid: 1) if it would hinder us from carrying out our objectives; 2) [if] it would lead to financial dependency on the government or undermine our Christian stewardship; 3) [if] it would bring with it improper government control; 4) if it would jeopardize our unified Christian education.<sup>47</sup>

The essay concluded:

These questions and many others will need to be addressed before we can give intelligent counsel to our congregations and constituency. May God preserve us from legalism on the one hand and hasty, incautious action on the other.<sup>48</sup>

One cannot help but feel, politics being politics, that the government will be kindly disposed toward religious schools as long as the Roman Catholic school system and the private/parochial schools of the Evangelicals remain viable. Legislators, governors, and presidents know where the votes come from, after all. Should these schools become the recipients of federal and state programs, our schools will also stand to benefit. History indicates that benefits may accrue without governmental interference; neither the Catholics nor the evangelicals have been willing to part with their religious freedoms. On the other hand, if these systems fail, our schools could be facing very difficult times, perhaps even the removal of the church’s historic exemption from property taxes.

Given these circumstances, one ventures to suggest that we might gladly receive what God allows the nations to grant us. St. Paul urged that “requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made...for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet

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<sup>46</sup> Brenner, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Brenner, p. 12-13.

<sup>48</sup> Brenner, p. 15.

lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:1-3). For the sake of the gospel we pray for peace, economic growth, good weather, etc. For the sake of the gospel we might be willing to pray for government subsidies so that offerings can be redirected and used to expand ministry in other ways. For the sake of the gospel we might even pray – and I write this with my tongue stuck gently into my check – for the continued viability of the Roman Catholic and Evangelical school systems. We should also pray, of course, that God would rid these errorists of their false doctrine!

#### **D. The Matter of Christian Stewardship**

This essay in the series on *Issues in Parish Education* concerns finding ways to fund an expanded program of parish education. Previous essays have contended that this expansion is both vital and possible. We have made the point that the best ways to expand seem to rely on increased revenue. These pages have offered options and opportunities to increase revenue.

We have not mentioned what is perhaps the most obvious way to increase revenue, and that is by increasing member offerings. What we have mentioned is that member offerings are not increasing enough to be able to maintain the programs we have, let alone to be able to expand ministry. From all parts of the synod we hear the sad and steady litany that today’s church members are not as committed to good stewardship as were the church members of a generation ago. The Meitler report noticed, for example:

There seems to be decreasing loyalty and commitment to institutions in general. There is documented decline in the support for Protestant churches nationwide, and there is evidence of some loss of institutional support with the WELS...<sup>49</sup>

These observations might seem to encourage the kinds of second and third source funds that have been explored in this essay. Actually, the poor giving in the WELS seems to be advanced as a reason to not use other funding sources. Literature on all of the topics discussed in this essay suggests that using non-offering resources may damage congregational stewardship even more. The concern is that members will cease being good stewards if the budget no longer requires their good stewardship.

If this concern is valid, seeking funds apart from offerings could prove to be disastrous in the future. What happens if parents begin to find it impossible to pay tuition, if third-source revenue dries up, if government aid legislation is reversed? What happens if the government actually takes away privileges it has traditionally granted, for example, the property tax exemption? What happens if a generation of WELS members have forgotten how to support the parish education program? Should this scenario come to pass, we will quickly forget about expanding ministry. Our concern will be to maintain even a skeleton of the ministry we have.

Is the concern valid that WELS members will give less if parts of the parish education program are funded in other ways than by offerings? In some cases the concerns will not be valid. There will always be some in every congregation who understand that God asks for faithful management of their income, and that such management is not dependant on whatever other income the congregation enjoys. Many faithful stewards in our synod, who see that their own congregation’s synodical mission goal is being met, don’t stop giving but send the main share of their offerings for the work of the synod directly to synodical headquarters.

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<sup>49</sup> Meitler, p. 1.

It is likely true, however, that many members will reduce their offerings if the parish program can be funded by other means than member offerings. They will certainly wonder why they ought to give more if the budget is being met.

Some would say that such an attitude is a part of human nature. I must admit, however, that I have often wondered how much of this attitude – and it is common among our people – is actually encouraged by our traditional and most common stewardship awareness procedures. The essay closes with six points and then allows the issue to rest.

1. It ought not be assumed that the members of our congregations are practicing good stewardship simply because they are funding the congregational and synodical budget. Nor ought it to be assumed that they are bad stewards when they fail to fund the budget. A congregation of wealthy misers might be able to raise enough monies to support a minimal budget, but their success is only outward. When God looks at their hearts, he sees thieves and thugs who are robbing him of what is rightfully his. Despite their “success,” they should be condemned for their miserliness. A congregation of faithful and generous stewards might struggle to meet an overly ambitious budget. Their lack of success is what the world sees, but God sees disciples who are walking closely behind Jesus with overflowing hearts. Despite their lack of “success,” they should be praised for their generosity.

The point is that successful stewardship has to do with the burning hearts of individual Christians, and not with institutional budgets and goals.

2. It ought not be assumed that information about the needs and validity of the congregation and synod’s ministry program deserves a primary place in stewardship training and awareness. Information is very valuable for giving and givers. It helps Christians direct their offerings. It assures them that offerings are being well and wisely used. It shows them how the Lord is blessing the use of their offerings and that he is opening new opportunities for their continued good stewardship. But information remains secondary; law and gospel must be primary.

Could it be that our emphasis on information in stewardship training comes about because information is very helpful to us pastors? In the main, pastors are committed stewards. We have been convicted by God’s law and have come to rejoice in God’s saving work. We understand God’s plan for our lives and we have seen God’s pattern for good stewardship. Having been touched and instructed by God, we are ready to look to our fellow Christians for information about their various ministries that will help us use our offerings to the wisest advantage.

Some of our members are at a similar stage in their faith life. I submit that many of them are not at that stage. The message they need to hear is the message that brought us to the place we are, and that message is law and gospel. Information will encourage just about everyone to bring some sort of gift; even misers see that the church should receive some of their funds. But information works best, it seems to me, when hearts have been convicted, converted, and committed to follow the Savior’s will in their lives.

3. It ought not to be assumed that the general preaching of the law and the gospel are always the best tools for good stewardship training. In the Gospel for the 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost Jesus made it clear that wealth is a great barrier to following him. Luther is to have said that a man's wallet is the last part of him to be converted. Our members are wealthy and they live in a wealthy nation. Many are affected by our society's materialism; many more are afflicted with it. Members in our congregations need to hear Haggai and Malachi thunder about misplaced priorities and miserliness. They need to be told that they are robbing God with their paltry offerings. They need to hear the many words Jesus spoke about priorities and money. They also need to be told that the Savior forgives them for their miserliness. They need to know "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Finally, they need to understand the position they have in God's plan of service and ministry and they need to know God's guidelines for a money management that he loves.

We do not hesitate to preach God's law when it comes to marriage, divorce, abortion, homosexuality. We thunder against Sixth Commandment sins. Why should we hesitate to thunder against First Commandment sins? We do not hesitate to have training sessions for parents, newly-weds, and those desiring to witness to their friends.

Should we be looking for better ways to train Christian stewards?

We ought not assume that our members will be angered by sermons and lessons about money. One wonders if the anger pastors sometimes see in members because of "money sermons" is not the result of burdens that are laid on people to give for projects they never approved and know nothing about. Perhaps we would encounter less anger and more gratitude if we spent the majority of our "money" time repeating God's law about money and God's gospel about money instead of man-made goals and budgets.

Proclaiming God's law about money likely would lead some members to leave the church. So be it; others have left, too, and for other reasons than money. Better they leave the congregation as honest opponents of God than remain in the congregation as hypocritical supporters.

5. It ought not be assumed that this approach to stewardship training and awareness will not work in a congregation. We ask again: What has led us to be the givers we are? What has led us to set aside a percentage of our incomes to support the ministry of the gospel? What has moved us to open up our checkbooks and generously return to God the firstfruits of what he has given us? Is it not this law and gospel? If such a proclamation has worked on us, we can have the confidence that it will work on others as well.
6. It ought not be assumed that non-offering sources of congregational income will harm good stewardship if good stewardship training has been carried on. Christians who have been convicted of their natural miserliness, who have felt the warmth of Christ's forgiveness, and who have been instructed in God's plan for money stewardship will continue to be good stewards no matter how many additional financial gifts God showers on a congregation or

synod. These additional resources will then be able to be used as long as they are available, and offerings can be redirected to other forms of ministry.

## **Conclusion**

“Go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” There is the church’s commission. The Lord Jesus calls us to teach. What we teach is not a part of our liberty, but how we teach is. “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). There is the church’s promise. When we are faithful, God promises his blessing, even if our faithfulness includes the spending of money. Paul reminds us: “And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19). As we look at the financial horizon in the years ahead, we see blessing upon blessing that God makes available for our use. In order to take advantage of those blessings, however, we may have to restudy and rethink long-standing traditions and patterns. Those traditions may prove to be as valid today as they were a century ago. On the other hand, those patterns may need to be adjusted and changed. “Everything is permissible” – but not everything is beneficial” (1 Corinthians 10:23). As we strive to carry out the Great Commission in our era, may God give us wisdom to be both consistently committed to hold to what cannot change and creatively challenged to change what can.



# Issues in Parish Education

## Part IV: Methodology and the Means of Grace in Parish Education

by James Tiefel

### A. The Church's Concerns for Methods

The church of Christ, committed as it is to the inerrancy and reliability of the Scriptures, does not encounter many problems answering the question, "What shall we teach?" The Scriptures supply the answers, the Lutheran Confessions clarify the answers, personal study and exegesis confirm the answers.

The church has had more difficulties answering the question, "How shall we teach?" Over the millennia of history believers have used a wide variety of methods to proclaim and pass along the truths of God's Word. Adam taught his sons the message of God, and soon they were also "proclaiming the name of the LORD," but certainly in different ways from the ones their father had used with them. Noah trained his sons, too, but he also testified of the impending wrath of God to his recalcitrant society. Moses designated a set of elders to teach and counsel the people of Israel, and David established schools for the teaching of music. The school of the prophets trained teachers and proclaimers during the era of Elijah and Elisha.

The importance of methods in proclaiming the Word of God continued to be obvious in the New Testament church. Peter used one style of preaching when he addressed the Jews on Pentecost, Paul used another style when he spoke to Greeks on Mars Hill. As they used various teaching methods, the apostles were following the example of the Master himself, whose use of teaching methods might make a list most contemporary educators would be proud to include in a methods textbook. Jesus used various questioning techniques, he added vivid illustrations to create clear concepts, he repeated the major points of his lessons for the sake of solidifying them in the minds of his hearers, he even modeled the proper corresponding emotions as he taught the principles of the kingdom of God.

The western church followed the Savior's example. A list of the great educators of western civilization invariably includes the names of great churchmen: Alcuin (735-804), the head of Charlemagne's Palace School; Johann Comenius (1592- I 670), the Moravian bishop, sometimes considered to be the father of modern education; John Calvin (1509-1564), the reformer of Geneva. And Luther's name appears on every list of great educators. In fact, Painter, in his book *Luther on Education*, makes these claims about the Reformer:

He brought about a reorganization of schools, introducing graded instruction, an improved course of study, and rational methods. In his appreciation of nature and of child-life, he laid the foundation for educational science. He made great improvements in method; he sought to adapt instruction to the capacity of children, to make learning pleasant, to awaken mind through skillful questioning, to study things as well as words, and to temper discipline with love.<sup>50</sup>

The quest for proper methods was not always an easy one, however, and occasionally was accompanied by acrimony. Luther's opinions about the methods used in 16<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholic schools are well known. What may not be so well known is the severe criticism many

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<sup>50</sup> Painter, F.V.N. *Luther on Education* (St. Louis: Concordia), p. 167.

orthodox Lutheran pastors encountered at the hands of the Pietists two centuries after Luther. Because of the many doctrinal controversies which occurred during the century after Luther's death, some Lutheran pastors began to abandon Luther's careful pedagogical methods for a more dogmatical approach to child education. Pastors added theological intricacies and polemical arguments to the simple teachings of the basic chief parts of the Catechism; memorization assignments became immense and were accompanied by little more than rote learning. The complexities of these assignments and the sheer weight of the material made much of instruction and memorization a mere intellectual exercise.<sup>51</sup> Pietism rejected this approach to teaching. Lutheran pastors who leaned toward Pietism began to use the Bible for instruction rather than catechetical expositions. Instead of merely lecturing and assigning memory work, the teacher led the children to discover truth from pertinent Bible passages.<sup>52</sup>

### **The Battle Over Methods Rejoined**

In some ways the battle between the supposed "Orthodox" position and the so-called "Pietist" position is still being waged today. A former pastor in the WELS, Dr. Gregory Jackson, apparently is convinced that Pietistic methodology is behind most of what ails contemporary Lutheranism:

All the ills of Lutheranism today (unionism, open communion, Church Growth Enthusiasm, historical-critical method, feminist theology, gay activism, abortion advocacy, clergy divorce, clergy sex abuse, clergy drug abuse, anti-nomianism, membership losses, financial losses, closing of schools) which are distributed in all the synods, stem from Lutheran denial of the efficacy of the Word, or one might say, from Pietism supplanting Lutheranism.<sup>53</sup>

While not many are as willing as Dr. Jackson to be so pointed and so condemning in their criticism, there is plenty of evidence suggesting that more than a few Lutheran pastors, including some WELS pastors, share his opinions. There is concern among at least some that humanistic and pietistic methods are being viewed as being as important as the means of grace themselves and are, in fact, replacing the means of grace.

When Jesus commissioned the church to "go and make disciples of all nations," the objective of his commission was clear: he wanted people to be converted and he wanted people to live a life of love. We do not need to document that these are the Savior's kingdom objectives. With these goals he gave the church the means it needed to reach the goals: baptizing and teaching, i.e., Word and sacraments.

There have always been those in the church who have found it difficult to accept the reality that Jesus has given the church no promises about either the quantitative or qualitative success of its baptizing and teaching. Paul asserts that the gospel "is the power of God for salvation," but it is a matter of faith and not of sight or feeling that the Holy Spirit accomplishes successes through the Word. The Word proclaimed to Joseph of Arimathea did not at first bear fruit for anyone to see, for "Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews" (John 19:38). Even where the seed of the Word fell on good soil, the quantity of fruit varied: "a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown" (Matthew 13:8). The Formula of

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<sup>51</sup> Kuske, David. *Seminary Education notes*, p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Kuske, p. 8.

<sup>53</sup> Jackson, Gregory. "In Praise of ELCA." *Christian News*, March 7, 1994, p. 20.

Concord insists that the variety of the Holy Spirit's successes dare not cause doubt about the efficacy of the gospel in the heart of believers and preachers:

Neither preacher nor hearer is to doubt this grace and efficacy of the Holy Ghost, but should be certain that when the Word of God is preached purely and truly, according to the command and will of God, and men listen attentively and earnestly and meditate upon it, God is certainly present with his grace, and grants...what otherwise man can neither accept nor give from his own powers. For concerning the presence, operation, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, we should not and cannot always judge *ex sensu*, as to how and when they are experienced in the heart; but because they are often covered and occur in great weakness, we should be certain from, and according to the promise, that the Word of God preached and heard is an office and work of the Holy Ghost by which He is certainly efficacious and works in our hearts.<sup>54</sup>

The creature's sinful heart is never satisfied with the promises of God, however, and the quest to achieve spiritual objectives with methods and procedures that are not God's means has been a part of human history since Adam. The temptation to rely on a methodology instead of on the means of grace to achieve spiritual ends is born in a plain lack of trust in the divine promises. The sinful creature is not convinced that God's ways can work: not his ways to save, nor his ways to convert or to sanctify or even to judge. Because Christians still have a sinful nature, they carry the fears of the sinful nature with them until their death, and so they are plagued with this same lack of trust: Moses was at Meribah, Elijah was at Horeb, Peter was in Gethsemane. Some Christians have struggled with this fear and, by God's grace, have overcome the temptation: Abraham, who had killed Isaac in his heart if not with his hand; Paul, who spoke without wise and persuasive words, Rahab, who welcomed the spies. Some have succumbed to it: Judas, who could not be convinced that humility and poverty could deliver Messianic success; Melancthon, who felt that compromise rather than steadfastness could alone achieve peace.

The sinful lack of trust in the power of divine means has led entire churches and theological systems into heresy. The root problem of both Catholicism and Calvinism is the supposition that the objective gospel cannot by itself prompt the Christian heart to produce fruits of faith without the threatening and legalistic arm of the law. Arminianism and Pietism spring from a similar source: Faith can produce fruit by itself and does not need the objective gospel to empower it.

Lacking faith in the power of the gospel in Word and sacraments, God's means of grace, these theological systems rely on methods and means other than the gospel to achieve spiritual goals: Rome on the threats of the law; Calvinism on the instruction of the law; Arminianism and Pietism on whatever molds and moves the emotions and the free will. The methods and procedures of Roman Catholicism and the Reformed are not simply variants of the means of grace. They are, in fact, replacements for the means of grace and are, therefore, opposed to the means of grace. These methods are thereby opposed to God himself. "He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16).

To any thought that something besides the gospel can accomplish God's will and ways, God himself answers:

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<sup>54</sup> Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Art. II, 55-56, p. 903.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:8-11).

The Augsburg Confession adds:

That we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel.<sup>55</sup>

The concern that haunts some today is that the subtleties of especially Reformed thought may be entering orthodox Lutheranism by way of methodology. In other words, gullible Lutherans may be using Reformed methods without realizing their theological sources, and are slowly but steadily carrying Lutheran doctrine – and Lutheran people – down Arminian tubes. Twelve years ago Martin Scharlemann offered a warning about the influence of the Reformed on confessional Lutherans:

Our Lutheran heritage is threatened not only from the left, by historical critics and their followers, but also from the right, by fundamentalism (evangelicalism). In fact, at the moment, the latter is, by all odds, the more menacing because so much of it sounds very biblical, and also because so many of our fellow conservative Lutherans hear fundamental preachers and read “evangelical” literature with Lutheran eyes and ears, so to speak, and thus feel at home in this material.<sup>56</sup>

The question that must be answered in our era is this: How shall we follow the example of the Master Teacher and his orthodox followers through the centuries who used a variety of methods in their teaching but at the same time avoid the errors of those who rejected the means of grace? Perhaps the questions can be posed in this way: What place does methodology have in a synod which so tenaciously clings to the preeminence of the means of grace?

## **B. Methods to Communicate the Gospel**

If the church is to carry out the Savior’s commission to “preach the gospel to every creature,” and to “baptize and teach,” it needs a plan. Peter had an outline for his Pentecost sermon, after all, because he understood that the gospel truths needed to be organized in some way. The Holy Spirit determined that the apostles had a ready cache of languages at their disposal so that various languages could be put to use whenever necessary. The first century church found ways to select Matthias and the seven deacons because the believers knew that

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<sup>55</sup> Augsburg Confession, Art. V, p. 45.

<sup>56</sup> Scharlemann, Martin H. “Fundamentalism.” *Affirm*, 9:5 (February-March, 1982), p. 2.

public ministers had to be chosen. Jesus suggested that the gospel he proclaimed in ever-widening circles – first Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, then the ends of the earth – because he understood that the direction of evangelization needed to be established.

The difficulty in deciding on methods and plans used in gospel proclamation and sacramental use comes not because of the means of grace but because of people. The Word doesn't change. People change; their age changes, their language changes, the location of their homes changes. No one would suggest that the church should proclaim the gospel in Greek anymore, unless the church is ministering in Greece. No one would propose that all mission endeavors must begin in Jerusalem. No one would insist that 20<sup>th</sup> century sermons include the same applications as Peter's sermon on Pentecost. As people have changed through the centuries, the church has usually been ready to modify its methods and plans of proclaiming the Word and using the sacraments.

People are changing in our era, too. Some have said that the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the greatest era of change in the history of the world. For example, human beings in almost every culture are much more visually oriented than they were a century ago. Children cannot imagine what learning would be like without television. Inter-generational role-modeling is almost unheard of today; children cannot imagine living under the same roof with their grandparents; neither can their parents, for the matter. Adults don't read as they once did; they learn what's going on in the world by watching and hearing the news. Adults do attend school, however, more than they ever did. They are interested in learning, especially that which has practical value. While it is true that human beings of every age are conditioned to learn in certain ways, it may also be true that the conditioning is more acute and more pronounced in our age than in any other.

And so the church of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century strives and, to a certain extent, struggles to find methods that will pass the Word along to late-20<sup>th</sup> century people. Spanish has been added to our ministerial education curriculum. There is a growing determination that pastors and teachers should have cross-cultural sensitivities. Students learn about audio-visual aids and distinctive procedures for teaching adults. We continue to stress the importance of delivery as well as content in homiletics classes, and our courses in education are called methods courses. We have books, manuals, and newsletters by the dozen that suggest various methods for worship, evangelism, church administration, etc.

### **God's Methods**

Our finest methods manual is the Bible. No one has a better understanding than God himself of the power and efficacy of the Word, and God is not about to use methods that would replace his own means of grace. A careful reading of Scripture would lead us to study the methods God used to proclaim his message, then the methods his Son used during his earthly ministry, and finally the methods his servants used and recorded by divine inspiration.

The divine communicator was a master at discussion questions: Where are you Adam? Who do men say I am? Will you also go away? The divine communicator used audio-visual aids: the rainbow, the pillars of smoke and fire, the snake on the pole in the wilderness. To make concepts vivid and clear the divine communicator illustrated divine truth with personifications, similes, metaphors, and parables. The divine communicator modeled appropriate emotions for his hearers: His anger burned over wickedness at Sinai, he wept in sadness over Jerusalem's impenitence, he took little children into his arms and blessed them. The divine communicator employed beauty and splendor to underscore the concepts of majesty and grace: the Garden of Eden, the tabernacle and temple, psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. The divine communicator

made efforts to touch all the human senses as he revealed the story of his love, even the sense of smell. Think of the effect a day at the temple would have had on teenage nostrils!

It would not be too difficult to produce five essays on the subject “Divine Methods of Communicating the Law and Gospel.” Another series might be entitled “Apostolic Methods of Communicating the Gospel.” In fact, Prof. Valleskey composed just such a set of essays in 1987: “A Portrait of Paul With Application to Contemporary Mission Methods.” The point is that, in our search for methods that do not replace or undermine the means of grace, we might be kept very busy simply by seeking to imitate the methods found in the Scriptures.

### **Divine Methods and the Methods of the Social Sciences**

An interesting sidelight of a study of scriptural methods for proclamation would be that many methods used by God and his inspired servants are also suggested by the social sciences, e.g., sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc. It is possible, for instance, to teach seminary students methods which have been proposed by educational psychologists and then note at the end of the class how Jesus used the same methods in his teaching ministry.

Permit an example. In a 1985 article in *Psychology Today*, author Anne Rosenfeld noted:

In the 1950s, the VA (Veterans Administration), fairly quick to recognize music’s many positive effects, particularly on mental patients – such as improving depressive mood, morale, and sociability – installed music therapy programs in some of its hospitals. Music therapy then spread to settings such as mental hospitals and residential care centers for the mentally retarded...

In a recent pilot study, Helen Bunny found that when patients heard sedative classical or popular music tapes in a hospital coronary care unit, their heart rates could be lowered. She had found similar effects for patients’ blood pressure when sedative music is used in the operating room. Raymond Bahr, director of coronary care at St. Agnes Hospital in Baltimore, where the tapes have been used, says, “Music therapy ranks high on the list of modern-day management of critical care patients.”<sup>57</sup>

The truth of the matter is that David, the young harpist, was ahead of Rosenfeld and Bonny by 3000 years. Long before modern science was ready to observe and measure the effects of music on mental patients, God allowed psychological methods to be used to calm troubled Saul. Luther also observed this power in music:

For whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate...what more effective means than music can you find?<sup>58</sup>

It ought to surprise no one that the methods God has used to communicate his Word are often the same as those suggested by the social sciences. The social sciences make their suggestions on the basis of studies they make of the human creature. God is the creator of the human creature. Does it seem that the Creator of the human mind, its emotions, and its will

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<sup>57</sup> Rosenfeld, Anne H. “Music Hath Charms.” *Psychology Today*, December 1985, p. 54.

<sup>58</sup> *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Vol. 53, p. 322-323.

would know less about the creature than human experts who observe the creatures? Doesn't it seem obvious that the Creator would communicate his message of love with methods he designed to interact with the mind he created? The social sciences are simply observing what God already knows and has put to use.

All this means that Christians ought not reject methods suggested by the social sciences just because the social sciences have suggested them. We have no delusions about the loyalty to Scripture held by most sociologists and psychologists. Many are atheists. But their observations of what the human mind and emotions are like are simply observations of what God created the human mind and emotions to be. Many of the methods they suggest are valid because they are based on an observation of God's own creation.

### **Methods Cannot Create Faith and Good Works**

Where the church must take leave of the social sciences is not necessarily in their proposed methodology but in their conclusions. On the basis of study, observation, calculation, and probability, the social sciences are able to calculate what will and what will not be effective methodology to achieve a certain objective. In other words, efficacy is measurable. While the proclamation of the gospel can benefit from these studies as to methodology, it cannot rely on these observations as to results. The human mind may invariably react in a predictable way, but the sinful mind does not. The consistencies that are a part of God's creation do not reappear in God's plan of salvation. The creation of faith and of good works does not take place in the same way as the circling of the planets or the coming of the seasons. God has bound himself to a regulated creation: "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease" (Genesis 8:22). His plan of salvation, however, remains shrouded in loving mystery:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" (Romans 11:33-34)

Of this salvation phenomenon the Confessions say:

For through the Word and Sacraments, as thorough instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, *where and when it pleases God*, in them that hear the Gospel.

The reality is that methodology – even divine methodology – and spiritual success do not exist in a cause and effect relationship. It can not be said without blasphemy, for instance, that God failed to use the best methods to proclaim law and gospel to the people of Israel. But even the best methods failed to keep Israel from rejecting its own Messiah. Jesus pointed to the true cause of Israel's unbelief when he wept over Jerusalem:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but *you were not willing*. (Matthew 23:37)

It cannot be said without blasphemy that Jesus failed to use every good method to lead Judas to hear and understand the promises of kingdom. Nor can it be said that Stephen failed to preach with good methods even though the crowds rushed him and killed him.

On the other hand, it can be said without blasphemy that Jesus did not use the best methods of communication with the Canaanite woman – he ignored her, after all (to teach the disciples a lesson), and might as well have called her and her daughter dogs. Yet he was able to say to her, “Woman, you have great faith!” (Matthew 15:28)

### **Methods Can Lead Human Beings to Civil Righteousness**

Since psychological and sociological methods are based on an observation of the human mind and characteristics, they are able to affect human beings. Since unbelievers are as human as believers, these methods might affect unbelievers and believers similarly. Educational psychologists can observe both Christian and non-Christian children studying math and conclude on the basis of evidence that these children retain more facts and are able to apply the facts more easily when they are led to discover solutions on their own rather than being told the solutions. Experts in fund raising techniques are able to calculate which fund raising methods seems to elicit the most money from people, and they may discover that their observations are valid for both believers and non-believers.

There is a difference, of course, between actions that are prompted by the gospel and those prompted by psychological methods. Those prompted by the gospel are truly fruits of faith and are acceptable before God because they are prompted by the Spirit and done in love for God. Actions prompted by psychological means are nothing more than civil righteousness, that righteousness which is born in the natural knowledge of God and is motivated by propriety and law. In many cases, however, acts of civil righteousness masquerade as fruits of faith, and casual observers cannot tell the difference. Even the actions of Christians may be nothing more than civil righteousness if their actions are prompted by nothing more the law or habit. Wicked children may obey when they are coerced by threats or rewards, and their obedience may look no different from that of believing children. Believing children may also obey when coerced by threats and promises, and their obedience may look no different than when they obey out of love for Jesus. Unbelieving husbands may also love their wives as Christ loved the church, unbelieving wives may also submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ. They may love and submit with Christ in their minds, but they do not have Christ in their hearts.

The Apology identifies the truth about civil righteousness:

The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the Law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God... If the carnal mind is enmity against God, the flesh sins, even when we do external civil works. If it cannot be subject to the Law of God, it certainly sins even when, according to human judgment, it possesses deeds that are excellent and worthy of praise.<sup>59</sup>

The social sciences may suggest methods which even the Lord Jesus has been pleased to put into use for the sake of the gospel. As we have seen, however, these methods alone, without the working and will of the Holy Spirit, cannot achieve conversion, faith, or good works; in fact,

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<sup>59</sup> Apology, Art. IV, 34, p. 129.



the Holy Spirit can convert people and prompt good works without these methods. These methods may, however, achieve successes that appear to be conversion, faith, and good works.

### **C. Choosing Methods for Parish Education**

We began our study on *Methods in Parish Education* with the observation that there seems to be among us an uneasy feeling that we are at risk in the area of methodology. We are determined to retain the means of grace as predominant in our teaching, and yet we want to use the best methods we can to communicate the gospel. We are deeply concerned about falling into the Pietistic trap of trying to achieve spiritual results with means other than God's. We repeat that we do not have nearly the problem asking "What shall we teach?" as we do asking "How shall we teach it?"

Our study of methods and the means of grace seems to have led us to several summary points.

*Carefully identify the objectives of various facets of church work.*

Not everything we do in church and school has a spiritual objective. We want students to know proper fingering when they play the piano and proper passing techniques when they play basketball. We want order in our classrooms. We want children and adults to learn and retain facts and principles. We want to raise funds for the support of ministry. We want visitors to return to our churches a second time. All of these are valuable and noble objectives. The doing of these things, however, is not necessarily a part of faith nor are these objectives the church's most important goals.

More than proper fingering we want children to praise God with music. More than proper passing techniques we want children to take care of their bodies. More than order we want willing obedience to God and his representatives. More than the learning of facts we want trust in those facts, a commitment to them, and a determination to put them into practice. More than funds we want an eager and cheerful management of God's blessings. More than visitors we want people who come to faith in Jesus.

*Decide when it is proper and beneficial to combine objectives in ministry.*

God exalts the position of the government even though neither its objectives nor its method have anything to do with faith. God commands the government to rule with the law for the sake of safety and peace for its citizens. God cares about safety and peace because in such all atmosphere the gospel can be proclaimed without opposition.

Congregations may find it beneficial to set objectives for ministry which are not in and of themselves related to faith for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel. They may set objectives in the classroom for orderliness and quiet so that the gospel can be heard. They may determine to strive for the objective of good learning so that the facts of the gospel can be known and retained. They may set objectives for attracting visitors to worship so that the gospel can be proclaimed to them.

Pastors and congregations need to be on guard, however, that non-faith objectives do not come to stand against spiritual objectives. The objective of achieving order in the classroom ought not be so overwhelming that it overshadows the objective of faith-wrought respect for God and teachers. Efforts to make the unchurched comfortable at worship dare not result in a

removal of the gospel from worship. In the essayist's opinion, too strong an emphasis on fund raising likely will compromise the objective of leading members to be willing and cheerful stewards of God's financial blessings. The legitimacy of non-faith objectives in ministry does not set aside the truth that these dare not replace or overshadow faith objectives. Non-faith objectives are legitimate only because and only insofar as they serve the cause of the gospel.

*Know what methods are effective to achieve non-faith objectives.*

Here is where the social sciences are able to benefit the church; statistical analyses, evaluations, and probabilities are their bread and butter. They are able to observe human behavior and determine scientifically that children are more orderly and their retention is better, that adults are more eager to attend education classes and more willing to return to a church a second time if certain methods are used. On the basis of experience and study they can claim that their suggested methods are *effective* methods; they do work to achieve the objectives they have set.

*Do not confuse faith objectives and non-faith objectives and do not confuse the methods that will achieve non-faith objectives with the means of grace that may achieve faith objectives.*

Orderliness in the classroom is not the same as willing and eager obedience. Good retention is not the same as Christian commitment. Willing attendance is not the same as devotion to the Word. For the church, non-faith objectives are never ends in and of themselves. Pastors and members need to understand this truth. The use of the finest educational methods may achieve order, retention, and willing attendance, but they will not achieve obedience, commitment, and devotion. Therefore, a congregation that insists on the best methods has done only a part of its work; it must also insist that the gospel is carefully and thoroughly taught and explained.

The fact is that children may be led to obedience even in a disorderly classroom. They may become committed to the Scriptures without the best teaching methods. Adults may become devoted to the Word even when they are not initially drawn to study willingly and eagerly. Visitors may return to church a second time because their hearts have been fired by the gospel. These are faith-results, and they come about only through the power of the Holy Spirit "who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the gospel."

Personally, I do not believe that there is so much confusion among us on these matters. I do believe, however, that we would do well to be more careful when we combine the two words "effective" and "methods." Only those methods can be called effective that are proven to be able to achieve measurable objectives. A so-called power discipline program can be called an effective method because its results can be predicted. A teaching method that involves students in questioning can be called an effective teaching method because its results can be measured. A staffed nursery can be called an effective method for leading visitors to return to church a second time because studies can gauge the reality of this claim.

On the other hand it becomes confusing. I think, to call a psychologically-oriented discipline program an effective discipline method, since the church understands that true discipline is connected to faith. Referring to effective teaching methods in a Christian classroom tends to muddle the issue, since the objective of Christian teaching is both mental and spiritual.

One hesitates to call a staffed nursery an effective evangelism tool, since evangelism involves the proclamation of the gospel, and the gospel works on its own time schedule. Using the word “effective” a little more selectively would relieve, I think, many of the concerns some people have that methods may be replacing means in our ministry. When it comes to matters of faith, the matters that hold the church’s primary attention and concern, only the gospel can be rightly called effective, and the gospel is effective only within the parameters of the Spirit’s working and God’s will.

A more careful use of the word “effective” would also overcome some of the rather careless overstatements that are occasionally made about the use and value of methods.

#### **D. The Stewardship of Methodology**

If it cannot be said that methods, in and of themselves, can be considered effective to produce faith objectives, why do pastors, teachers, and staff ministers spend so much time studying methods? If the Holy Spirit can and does work even through so-called poor methods (he was mighty effective, after all, speaking through an ass!), why should we spend time considering methodology at all?

Proclaimers of the gospel ought to carefully consider the matter of methods not because they desire to achieve results but because they desire to be good stewards of the blessings of God. Paul reminded the Corinthians, “It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2). I do not believe Paul’s demand for faithfulness has to do only with the message of God’s salvation but also with the blessings of his creation. Proclaimers of the gospel ought to be faithful in their use of both.

Every blessing from God serves the gospel in one way or another. For example, we preach the law so that human hearts might be prepared to hear the gospel. As we preach the law we do not know how the Spirit will use this preaching, but we preach the law anyway, because we know such preaching serves the gospel. We also use the best methods we know – methods suggested by the Scriptures as well as methods suggested by the social sciences – as we communicate the gospel. We do not know how the Spirit will use our methods, but we use them anyway, for we know this serves the gospel. Those who refuse to preach the law do not understand that God gives us the law to serve the gospel. Those who refuse to use good methods do not understand that God gives us methods to serve the gospel. Failure to use these methods is nothing else than poor stewardship. God has not called us to convert the heathen or to create good works. This is his task; he assumes it gladly and receives the glory for it. God has called us to proclaim his gospel and to be good stewards as we do. This is our task. We ought to assume it gladly and give God glory as we use all his gifts in the service of Christ. It was this concern for the stewardship of methods that brought about words I quoted in a previous essay:

No servant of God dare boldly assert “I am proclaiming the gospel” without humbly asking “Am I proclaiming the gospel as God would have me?” A determination to find the best ways to communicate the gospel and to employ the best forms and methods in today’s ministry is not inconsistent with a sincere faith in the gospel. Francis Rossow wrote: “The foolishness of our preaching consists in its content, not in its style. What is foolish is our message, not the manner of communicating the message. The foolishness of preaching does not necessitate foolish preaching.” Each of us must learn to be forever content with the successes of the gospel but forever discontent with his own efforts to proclaim the gospel.

Such discontent for us is nothing else but a burden of joy.

In all this we dare not replace the gospel, not with the law and not with methods. Despite our deep desire to convert the lost and our honest eagerness to see fruits of faith, we dare neither overthrow nor overshadow that which alone creates and strengthens faith. As we strive to be good stewards of the blessings of God, we will be content, as Martin Franzmann urges us to be:

Preach you the Word and plant it home  
And never faint; the Harvest-Lord  
Who gave the sower seed to sow  
Will watch and tend his planted Word.

# Issues in Parish Education

## Part V: Dealing With Sexual Abuse in the Parish

*by James Tiefel*

The final issue in this series is that of sexual abuse in the parish. Of all the subjects we have addressed, this may be the unhappiest and the one we face with most reluctance. Fortunately, it does not often become an issue in our congregations, but when it becomes an issue it is always damaging and often divisive. It is an issue that everyone in the Christian church is facing these days and, at least in the past decade, it is an issue that has focused its attention critically at members of the pastoring and teaching clergy. It is likely that the pendulum of interest eventually will swing to a more balanced position. We can be sure, however, that it will never swing back to the position it had before the 1970s, and pastors and teachers will continue to be obligated to understand and address the issue.

The specific cause for the inclusion of this issue in this series of essays was the author's personal interest in the subject after a sexual abuse case at a nearby parish school. The interest was deepened after the Conference of Presidents issued its policy on Sexual Abuse and Harassment. The policy was greeted by many questions and even a few protests. The faculty also expressed an interest in the Presidents' policy and accepted the essayist's offer to produce a study which might also serve this institute. The bulk of the material presented today was studied at a recent faculty study meeting.

It has come to my attention that the Conference of Presidents is in the final processes of revising its 1993 policy. While some of the provisions of the new policy have come to light, this essay will not treat them specifically, nor will it take issue with any particulars of the present policy.

This study is going to address the issue of sexual abuse in two areas: the sexual abuse of children and the sexual abuse and harassment of adults. The focus in both cases is on abuse which is perpetrated by a pastor or a Lutheran elementary school teacher. The study will not concern itself with abuse by parents or other guardians. It will not deal with the so-called late-memory syndrome in which adults recall being abused as children.

### **Definition of Sexual Abuse**

It might be hoped that a church body like the WELS would never have to deal with sexual abuse or harassment. Experience points to a different reality, however. Pastors and teachers in our synod have been charged with sexual impropriety. Some have been obligated to resign from their congregations, some have left the ministry permanently, and some have been imprisoned.

### *Sexual Abuse of Children*

Church Mutual Insurance Co., the primary insurance carrier for the WELS and most of its congregations, has a great interest in the sexual abuse issue. The company has produced a booklet entitled "Safety Tips on a Sensitive Subject: Child Abuse." The booklet states:

Definitions of sexual abuse vary according to differences in state laws. However, a general definition includes any contact or interaction between a child and an

adult in which the child is being used for the sexual stimulation of the adult or another person.<sup>60</sup>

The Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Act, originally passed in 1977 and revised in 1983 defines abuse as

...sexual intercourse, conduct, or exploitation, or permitting or requiring a child to engage in prostitution.

Child abuse (and this includes the sexual abuse of teenagers under 18) is catching the attention of the news media more than ever before. Especially the Roman Catholic Church is being forced to endure sensational press releases concerning charges of abuse brought against priests and monastic brothers. Even the highly-esteemed Chicago archbishop, Joseph Cardinal Bernadin, was not immune to allegations. Although the charges against the cardinal eventually were dropped, similar charges against other Roman Catholic clergy have been substantiated.

### *Sexual Abuse of Adults*

A subject which has appeared in the media almost as often as the sexual abuse of children is the sexual abuse and harassment of adults by a clergyman. The victims are invariably women who have been abused by male clergymen. Some of the stories have caused a veritable media frenzy, e.g., the Jimmy Swaggert and Jim Baker adulteries. While sexual liaisons between clergymen and female parishioners have always caused a stir (e.g., the 1872 charges against Brooklyn's Henry Ward Beecher), traditionally they have been thought of as adultery but not sexual abuse. A 1987 document, however, produced by the Northwest District of the American Lutheran Church and considered to be a model policy for ELCA congregations, certainly moved in that direction:

Sexual contact between a pastor and a parishioner, client, or employee with whom the pastor has a professional, pastoral relationship is unethical and unprofessional behavior and shall be deemed as sexual misconduct.<sup>61</sup>

The reason why such sexual conduct is becoming thought of as abuse rather than simply adultery (which troubles neither the government nor society in general) is because pastors and teachers hold positions of trust among members of a congregation and are authority figures as well. Sexual misconduct is being defined, therefore, as a *misuse of the power* of the pastoral office.

Pastors or pastoral counselors are *always* responsible for the emotional, spiritual, and physical protection of persons who come to them for help or over whom they have *any* kind of authority. Breach of this protective relationship is improper and/or unethical.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> "Safety Tips On a Sensitive Subject: Child Abuse." Church Mutual Insurance Company.

<sup>61</sup> "Sexual Misconduct by Clergy Within Pastoral Relationships." Northwest District of the ALC. The entire policy is reprinted in *Is Nothing Sacred*, by Marie Fortune (San Francisco: Harper, 1989).

<sup>62</sup> Northwest District Policy. Italics in original.

Sexual misconduct is defined as sexual activity or contact (not limited to sexual intercourse) in which the pastor or pastoral counselor takes advantage of the vulnerability of the parishioner, client, or employee to engage in sexual behavior with the pastor or pastoral counselor within the professional relationship.<sup>63</sup>

A 1993 article in *The Christian Century* takes this point of view for granted:

Sexual exploitation is not as much about sex as it is about the abuse of power. Those with power can use sexual behavior against those with less power...<sup>64</sup>

It is becoming apparent that sexual misconduct is thought to have occurred even when there has been consent on the part of the abused individual. Three authors agree:

When viewed in terms of a power dynamic, sexual exploitation clearly admits of no consent by the victim, any more than an abused child consents to be beaten. The religious community must also learn from the law that consent is never a justification or defense for exploitation, and there are no situational exceptions.<sup>65</sup>

As with rape, a pastor's sexual or romantic involvement with a parishioner is not primarily a matter of sex or sexuality but of power and control. For this reason I call it pastoral sexual abuse rather than "pastor-parishioner relations" or, worse, a matter of private activity between consenting adults.<sup>66</sup>

Consent means an agreement between two people who have equal authority, power, and knowledge; both know and understand their agreement and its ramifications. Cooperation, on the other hand, does not necessarily imply consent.<sup>67</sup>

Sexual contact between an adult and a child (teenagers included) is never consenting sexual activity. The younger person will never have equal power, authority or knowledge with the older person. They may well – and do – cooperate. That, however, is abuse; the misuse of power to fulfill the needs of the more powerful person.<sup>68</sup>

The law also recognizes that consent is not an issue when a pastor and a parishioner are involved in sexual relationships. A recent Minnesota law, Minnesota Statute Chapter 148A, creates liability also for consensual sexual contact. In the bill, "'sexual contact' includes a litany

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<sup>63</sup> Northwest District Policy.

<sup>64</sup> Clark, Donald C. Jr. "Sexual Abuse in the Church: The Law Steps In." *The Christian Century*, April 14, 1993, p. 397.

<sup>65</sup> Clark, p. 397.

<sup>66</sup> Cooper-White, Pamela. "Soul Stealing: Power Relations in Pastoral Sexual Abuse." *The Christian Century*, February 20, 1991, p. 196.

<sup>67</sup> Rossbach, Debra D. "Does Sex Abuse Make You Uncomfortable?" *Lutheran Education*, September/October 1991, p. 24.

<sup>68</sup> Rossbach, p. 24.

of sexual actions by a psychotherapist ‘whether or not occurring with the consent of a patient or a former patient.’”<sup>69</sup>

It is unfortunate, of course, that the wrong of sexual abuse should focus on the abuse of power and not on the abuse of God’s gift of sex. By including the above statements, we give no indication that we believe the latter sin is less offensive to God and his people than the former sin.

### *Sexual Harassment*

Another variety of sexual abuse is sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is an illegal form of discrimination under a number of federal laws and policies, including Title VII of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972. The laws understand two kinds of sexual harassment:

*Quid Pro Quo Harassment* occurs when a person in a position of power pressures another person to meet his or her sexual demands.

*Hostile Environment Harassment*, the most common kind of harassment, occurs when repeated offensive behavior or comments create an unpleasant or intimidating environment and unreasonably interfere with someone at work or school. Hostile environment harassment may also involve sexual comments or inappropriate touching on a one-time basis.<sup>70</sup>

The former instance of abuse was magnified in the public press during the Senate hearings on Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, accused by Anita Hill of sexual harassment.

### **The State Deals With Sexual Abuse**

One might wish that the synod and its congregations would be able to deal with cases of sexual abuse and harassment without the influence of the government. However, in many cases, the government is going to become involved. Federal and state governments have laws which concern abuse and harassment. In addition to statutes passed by legislatures, common law, the progression of law established by the courts, also governs instances of sexual abuse. Both legislative actions and common law define sexual abuse, dictate procedures which must be followed in reports of abuse, and stipulate who besides the accused is liable for restitutionary and punitive damages.

### *The Law and Instances of Child Abuse*

We stated previously that definitions of child sexual abuse vary according to state. However, all 50 states have laws demanding that suspicions or allegations of child sexual abuse be reported to an appropriate state agency immediately. The Wisconsin law (“Wisconsin statute 48.981 – Abuse of neglected children”) contains a lengthy list of professionals who are obligated to report. On the list are:

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<sup>69</sup> Letter from the Law Firm of Meagher and Geer to the Conference of Presidents, April 9, 1992.

<sup>70</sup> “Preventing Sexual Harassment on Campus.” Prepared by Business and Legal Reports, Inc., Madison, CT 06443.



...school teacher, administrator or counselor, child care worker in a day care center or child caring institution, day care provider...

All these are obligated under penalty of law

...having reasonable cause to suspect that a child seen in the course of professional duties has been abused or neglected or having reason to believe that a child seen in the course of professional duties has been threatened with abuse or neglect and that abuse or neglect of the child will occur, shall report as provided in sub. 3. Any other person, including an attorney, having reason to suspect that a child has been abused or neglected or reason to believe that a child has been threatened with abuse or neglect and that abuse or neglect of the child will occur may make such a report.

Those required by law to report

...shall immediately contact by telephone or personally, the county agency, sheriff or city police department...and shall inform the agency...of the facts and circumstances contributing to a suspicion of child abuse or neglect...

Following the report, local law enforcement agencies have the these options according to the law:

If a reporter of abuse requests an immediate investigation, the police are obligated to conduct it.

The investigating officer may take the child into custody and deliver the child to a social worker.

The police may refer the case to the district attorney for criminal prosecution.

It is clear that the state is very serious about insisting that all suspicions and allegations of child sexual abuse be reported immediately. As Debra Rossbach has underlined, "The mandate is to report, not investigate."<sup>71</sup> Some states, such as Ohio, stipulate that newly discovered reports of past abuse must be reported to police authorities as long as the alleged abuser is still employed by the company or school.<sup>72</sup> Wisconsin law does not include this stipulation in its law,<sup>73</sup> although Dr. William Bennigan of the Mequon-Thiensville School District opined that he would contact police were such past abuse reported to him.<sup>74</sup>

In some states, Wisconsin among them, clergymen may report suspicions or allegations of sexual abuse, but are not required by law to do so. The situation changes, however, when the pastor is also the principal of the school. Although the Wisconsin State Assembly has held

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<sup>71</sup> Rossbach, p. 26.

<sup>72</sup> Rossbach, p. 26.

<sup>73</sup> Conversation with Ms. Sandy Williams, Ozaukee County District Attorney.

<sup>74</sup> Conversation with Dr. William Bennigan, vice-principal, Homestead High School.

hearings on obligating pastors to report instances of abuse, it is not likely that any law on this issue will be forthcoming.<sup>75</sup>

It may be interesting to note at this point that police authorities may conclude after investigating an allegation that the allegation is unsubstantiated. This may mean that the police have found that the allegation was not founded on fact. It may also mean that the police and the district attorney have concluded that the allegations cannot be proven in court. If the accused is tried and subsequently acquitted, the allegation remains on his criminal record along with the court's verdict. The individual must sue the court if he desires to remove the information from the record.

A school district has the right to terminate a teacher's employment even though the accused was found not guilty if evidence indicates that an action was inappropriate or that it likely took place despite the prosecutor's inability to prove the action in court. Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction has stripped a teacher's license even in cases where the court has brought back a not guilty verdict.<sup>76</sup> In the eyes of many child advocates, receiving a "not guilty" verdict from a court is not the same as being innocent. The way courts and lawyers work in our country, we can sympathize with that point of view; it is probable that some guilty teachers have been found to be not guilty in court. Unfortunately, some innocent teachers also have been harmed by this point of view and forced to seek other employment.

#### *The Law Deals with False Allegations of Child Abuse*

This brings us to a difficult situation. After decades of frustration with school administrators who seemed to have refused too often to recognize the seriousness and frequency of child sexual abuse, child advocates have gained the upper hand in the courts and legislatures. Both common law and legislative action reflect not only the power of child advocacy groups, but their distrust and rancor as well. The burden of proof in cases of abuse has swung from the child to the teacher, and, at least according to some teachers, this situation affects not only bad teachers but good teachers, too.<sup>77</sup>

The fact is that some children lie about or exaggerate instances of sexual abuse. Some children exaggerate innocently, their awareness of abuse having been heightened by abuse-prevention programs or zealous child advocates. Some children exaggerate carelessly and find themselves caught up with parents and neighbors in today's child abuse paranoia. Some children lie intentionally, determined to bring ruin on a teacher they do not like.

"It's all part of this idea of getting back at people," says Keith Geiger, president of the 2.1 million member National Education Association. "With the breakup of the family and everything that goes with it, kids have so much pent-up anger over their whole lives they vent their frustration on teachers."<sup>78</sup>

It is very difficult to get straight answers and firm statistics on the issue of false allegations. Officials who tend toward child advocacy admit to hardly any false allegations.

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<sup>75</sup> Conversation with Ms. Williams.

<sup>76</sup> Conversation with Ms. Ellen Henningsen, chief counsel, Wisconsin Education Association.

<sup>77</sup> Conversation with Ms. Henningsen.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted by Suzanne Fields, syndicated Washington Times columnist, in a 1994 editorial, "Most Charges of Sexual Misconduct Are False."

Some teachers groups, on the other hand, insist that the percentage is very high; Ms. Field's editorial mentioned 99%.

The reality lies somewhere in the middle. Risks to children seem more acute in politically conservative school districts. Risks to teachers seem most acute in school districts where a strong advocacy position exists – or where a strong advocate is in a position of authority.<sup>79</sup>

Where common sense prevails, police officers, district attorneys, and school administrators strive for balance. Police have special procedures for determining if an allegation is accurate before it is carried to the District Attorney for prosecution.<sup>80</sup> Balance in the District Attorney's office determines that both parties in an investigation will be treated with respect. A realistic phrase in the Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Act mandates teachers (for example) to report allegations of sexual abuse only when there is "reasonable cause." The phrase allows schools to be sure that rumors have some basis in fact before they are brought to the attention of the police or county agency.

### *The Law and Instances of Abuse and Harassment of Adults*

As mentioned previously, several federal laws govern instances of adult sexual abuse and harassment. Title VII of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, and the Civil Rights Act of 1991 deal with the harassment issue. The Equal Opportunity Commission (EEOC) promulgated "final guidelines on sexual harassment in the work place" in 1980. The federal government has no interest in the private mores of consenting adults, of course. The government is interested in protecting civil rights, and, with the accepted definition of abuse in mind, considers harassment to be an abuse of power over against a less powerful individual.

### *The Law Prosecutes Abusers in the Church*

Laws do not demand the reporting of suspicions of abuse as they do in the case of children. However, the full weight of law enforcement agencies and the courts stands ready to act in the event allegations are made and/or formal charges are brought. In an article previously referenced, Donald Clark wrote:

The judicial system has become less and less hesitant to apply such legal principles as assault, battery, infliction of emotional distress, negligence, discrimination, malpractice, breach of fiduciary duty and respondent superior (meaning the employer is responsible for the wrongful conduct of the employee) against those who abuse religious privileges.<sup>81</sup>

According to Clark,

At least eight states have passed laws against sexual exploitation by a counseling professional and/or minister. Illinois permits a victim of sexual abuse afflicted by a psychotherapist to sue for monetary damages, even if that sexual contact occurred outside the therapist's office or at a time other than a treatment session.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Conversation with Ms. Henningsen.

<sup>80</sup> Conversation with Sgt. Ray Knauer, Thiensville Police Department.

<sup>81</sup> Clark, p. 396.

<sup>82</sup> Clark, p. 397.

And as Clark indicates, it is not only the abuser who is liable for damages, but also the religious organization that hired him. This seems true even if only one employee committed only one act of harassment. The situation is becoming especially difficult because

An increasing number of jurisdictions are recognizing the need to analyze harassment from the victim's perspective. This generally means that conduct that most women would consider sexually harassing is actionable in a court of law.<sup>83</sup>

The most critical issue – and the issue which surely influenced the Conference of President's policy of certification – is that

courts are increasingly showing as little tolerance for those who know of but fail to report an abuser as they are for the perpetrators themselves.<sup>84</sup>

The specific law is Minnesota Statute Chapter 148A, Action for Sexual Exploitation: Psychotherapists. The law creates a cause of action against a psychotherapist “by injury caused to a patient or former patient as the result of sexual contact with the psychotherapist.” The law defines sexual contact with a litany of sexual actions “whether or not occurring with the consent of a patient.”<sup>85</sup>

Especially worrisome to the WELS and its congregations is the section entitled “Liability of Employer.” According to the statute, liability can result if:

The employer fails or refuses to take reasonable action when the employer knows or has reason to know that the psychotherapist has engaged in sexual contact with a patient or former patient.

The employer fails or refuses to make inquiries of an employer or former employer...who employed the psychotherapist...within the last five years, concerning the occurrence of sexual contacts...with patients or former patients.

The employer knows of an occurrence of sexual contact, receives a request from another employer, and fails or refuses to disclose the occurrence of the sexual contacts.<sup>86</sup>

Liability occurs if the employer's failure or refusal to take action “was a proximate and actual cause of any damages.”<sup>87</sup> An employer is relieved of any potential liability if the employer in good faith complies with its requirements.

There may be those in our churches who hear of these laws and conclude that they are seeing another case of the government abusing the church. While it is true that there are many in

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<sup>83</sup> Clark, p. 396.

<sup>84</sup> Clark, p. 396.

<sup>85</sup> Letter from Meagher and Geer.

<sup>86</sup> Letter from Meagher and Geer.

<sup>87</sup> Letter from Meagher and Geer.

government who could hardly be described as religious advocates, it is also true that America's churches have not always done the right thing in dealing with honest cases of abuse. It is sadly true that at least some law has been added to the casebooks because churches have been too often negligent in addressing problems of sexual abuse by their own clergymen. In too many cases the victim endured pain not only during the abuse but after it as well. Pamela Cooper-White describes what she considers to usually scenario to have been:

The family of the woman involved is generally broken up and the burden of blame placed on her. She loses her reputation, her parish, sometimes her job and even her whole life in the community. The best she can usually expect from denominational leaders is sympathy, not justice – that is, they take no action to prevent the pastor from doing it again, nor do they recognize the seriousness of his violation. At worst, she can expect to encounter disbelief or blame.<sup>88</sup>

Not only clergy leaders but lay leaders, too, dread the issue of sexual abuse by pastors. *Leadership* relates the story of an incident which took place in a small town where a 14 year old boy had sexually abused the pastor's two young children. When the pastor and his wife discovered what had occurred, they called the congregation's president before informing the authorities. Author Bob Mueller recounts the parents' horror and frustration as the president refused to support them, insisting that the principles of Matthew 18 be followed before the police were informed. It was the parents' concern for other children which finally led them to report the incident to the authorities. Had the parents not done so and followed the advice of the president, another case could have been added to the record book of the church reacting badly to an instance of sexual abuse.<sup>89</sup>

The courts are beginning to recognize that this is true and are awarding punitive damages where churches do not seem to have taken the issue seriously enough. The Archdiocese of Minneapolis and St. Paul and the Diocese of Winon

were found by the jury to have shown "a willful indifference or deliberate lack of concern for the rights and safety of others"; the verdict also stated that the dioceses needed to be deterred from future misconduct. Once jury member said jurors believed that the archdiocese was "negligent more than one time. They knew they had a priest with problems. They tried to get him help, but at no time did they remove the gentleman to an assignment where he would have absolutely no youth contact." Added the jury foreman: "We felt both dioceses profited by this, not financially, but by preservation of image. We honestly feel the two dioceses will never make the mistake again."<sup>90</sup>

### *The Church Deals With Sexual Abuse*

One might suppose that the Wisconsin Synod could stand somewhat aloof from the crises that are afflicting especially the Roman Catholics. One might also suppose that the issue involved here has to do with little more than liability. We contend, however, that there are any

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<sup>88</sup> Cooper-White, p. 198.

<sup>89</sup> Moeller, Bob. "A Case No One Wanted." *Leadership*, April 1993.

<sup>90</sup> "Sexual Abuse by a Priest." *Christian Century*, January 16, 1991, p. 42.

number of concerns that both the Conference of Presidents and all parish leaders have in the area of sexual abuse and harassment. Among them are these:

We have an obligation to protect the members of the Synod from sexual abusers.

The members of the Synod have a right to assume that we will not allow a sexual abuser to become a called worker or to remain a called worker in a congregation or school of the Synod. We seem also to have an obligation to come to the help of members who have been abused by called workers.

We have an obligation to help called workers who have been wrongfully accused of sexual abuse/harassment in every way possible: spiritually, legally, financially, and professionally.

We have an obligation to uphold and defend the reputation of the office of the ministry in the congregations of the Synod.

We ought to do everything possible to avoid the needless suspicion that pastors and teachers are generally suspect in the area of sexual abuse/harassment. This may be a difficult responsibility, but an important one nonetheless.

We have an obligation to protect the reputation of the Synod in society. On the other hand, we cannot give any impression that we are not willing to discipline those who are guilty of sexual abuse/harassment. Such an attitude would bring shame on the church in the world.

We have an obligation to assure all WELS members that these matters are dealt with respectfully, discretely, and lovingly.

We have an obligation to protect the Synod and its congregations from potential liability in the courts.

Before any other concern, however, we must begin with the presupposition that sexual abuse is sin. The Bible offers no compromises when it insists that sexual acts, sexual insinuations, and sexual jesting are sinful. We do not need to adduce the passages which support this.

Such actions and words remain sins whether the victims are adults or children, whether there is consent or not. In fact, the misuse of God's gift of sex is a sin even when there are no victims, e.g., when pastor and teacher share filthy jokes on the golf course. All who deal with these matters in the church must be rid of any notion that some sexual incidents are nothing more than "good-natured fun" or part of a "boys will be boys" situation.

It will be true that some incidents of sexual abuse and harassment will not be able to be dealt with by the church. The actions of an abuser may never become obvious, and the person abused may choose never to make the abuse known. In some cases, the abused may not even consider the actions of the abuser to be abuse. The church can do nothing about such cases but will recognize that God must deal with these sins as he does with other private sins.

There are three ways in which sexual abuse or harassment might become known in the church: It may be observed and whispered about; it may be reported by someone who has been abused (an allegation); it may be confessed by the abuser.

#### *When Abuse Is Observed and Whispered About*

It happens occasionally that a pastor or teacher gains a reputation for his “wandering eye,” for being “quite a ladies’ man,” or for “having his hands everywhere.” There may be no formal allegations of abuse or harassment. Leaders may notice these things themselves or hear about them in conversations with fellow members or workers. When these observations and reports become common, they are almost never without some basis in fact.

Leaders must not hesitate to speak to an individual on the basis of such observations and insinuations. There ought to be no thought that such actions are somehow innocent or that such insinuations are somehow unjustified. Of course, leaders should be cautious about acting on the basis of hearsay; on the other hand, repeated reports of this kind demand an explanation. Obviously, any encounter must be loving; reckless charges are not part of the spirit of Matthew 18. That the ministry not be blamed, however, concerns of this matter must be brought to an individual.

The pastor or teacher who is approached may be very upset, hurt, and embarrassed by the concerns voiced by a leader. The man may insist that he never supposed his actions would be misunderstood. He ought to be willing to admit, however, that some people obviously have misunderstood his actions. He ought to express his willingness to “go the mile” so that any false perceptions can be laid to rest. In this case the leader should be willing to accept this explanation and should carefully watch that appropriate actions have indeed been taken.

The pastor or teacher may admit that there is basis for the concerns: He may confess that he has been struggling with temptation. In this case the leader must be ready to minister to the man spiritually with appropriate law and/or gospel. He must also demand, gently but firmly, that the man seek counseling and he must be willing to help him secure and arrange it. If the leader is a layperson, he should insist that the called worker speak about the matter to his circuit pastor or district president. The leader ought also to follow up to see that the pastor or teacher has in fact sought counseling and spoken to the leaders of the district.

If the pastor or teacher expresses anger, vehemently denies the allegations, and criticizes the leader for announcing his concerns, there is probably cause for grave concern. The leader can do little at this point other than to accept the man’s word. He should however, bring another leader into his confidence. Together they should watch for signs and listen for reports of impropriety. If the signs and stories continue, the leaders should approach the man again. If he continues to deny and disdain the allegations, and if the situation continues, the leaders should “tell it to the church,” the church being, in most cases, the office of the district president.

#### *When Abuse Is Alleged*

It may happen that a member of a congregation brings an accusation of sexual abuse or harassment to a church or congregational leader. How ought this situation to be dealt with?

It was enlightening to study the policy on sexual abuse and harassment adopted by the Northwest District of the American Lutheran Church in 1987 and promoted as a model for other Lutheran denominations. The policy seems to balance well both the concern of protecting congregational members from abuse and the concern about protecting called workers from false allegations.

The Northwest District policy stipulates that:

Any complaint or allegation of sexual misconduct shall be brought to the immediate attention of the synodical bishop (district president) or his representative.

When a complaint...is brought to the attention of the bishop the bishop shall ask the Synodical council...to select...a special consultation committee which shall meet with the persons) bringing the complaint. (In a footnote the policy recommends that the committee be made up of equal numbers of men and women and that training in the special concerns of sexual contact be provided to prepare members for their task. The policy also stipulates that a complaint which involves a minor shall be immediately reported by the committee to the appropriate legal agency.)

The initial duties of the committee shall be:

to hear the allegations directly

to request that the complainant prepare a written complaint

To request permission of the complainant to use the complaint and the complainant's name in discussion with the accused person

to attempt to secure the complainant's willingness to appear before the committee for a formal hearing

to outline the process which will be followed in response to the complaint

If the committee determines that there is sufficient cause for concern, it shall meet with the accused person to:

present him with the formal complaint

outline the process which will be followed in response to the complaint, emphasizing the presumption of innocence and the right of due process

hear his response to the complaint

make available a summary of the response to the complainant for comment



The special committee shall not ask the complainant and the accused person to meet together during this phase of the process. There should be no opportunity for the accused person to pressure the complainant into dropping the charges.

The policy gives the committee the right to decide if the pastor should be suspended from pastoral duties (without prejudice and with pay) during the process and to secure the services of an interim pastor.

The committee shall fully investigate the accusation through information and documentation from the complainant, the accused person, and other credible sources as appear appropriate.

Based on the investigation...the committee shall, using its best judgment, determine the veracity of the complaint and recommend action to the Bishop.

The Northwest District policy outlines what actions the bishop shall take if

the accusations are not substantiated

the accusations are substantiated but considered to be minor

the accusations are substantiated and considered to be major

The policy appends a section on the appeal process. It also outlines what action the committee shall take over against a guilty person, a victim, and a congregation. Besides specific procedures for dealing with allegations of sexual misconduct, the policy statement also includes a lengthy section of "Education and Prevention."<sup>91</sup>

One can be sympathetic with the Conference of Presidents and the obvious desire to deal with these issues on a pastoral basis. The presidents are also sensitive to the fact that every case is different and must be handled differently. However, we wonder if cases of abuse, so delicate in nature but so liable to have far-reaching and sensational implications, may not demand a more formal and consistent policy.

The obvious strengths of the Northwest District Policy seem to be:

The control and oversight of the policy are very tight. All congregations are expected to report all allegations.

Both the allegation and all subsequent procedures are handled by a specially trained committee or commission.

The primary procedures are spelled out in advance of each case and shared with the complainant and the accused individual.

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<sup>91</sup> Northwest District Policy

Benefits seem to accrue to both the accused and the victim in this policy. Such a policy in the WELS would seem to accomplish the following goals:

Synod's pastors and teachers would be served by counselors, adjudicators, and lawyers who have been trained and gained experience in dealing specifically with abuse cases.

Since there would be synodical oversight of this commission(s), procedures would be carried out consistently in every area of the synod and would not be overly influenced by personality traits of district presidents and circuit pastors. (This is an especially important factor when the legalities are involved.)

Cases of abuse would be known by a very small group of people. Worker concerns that especially false accusations might become known and spoken about would seem to be greatly reduced.

Important elements in dealing with abuse cases would not be inadvertently overlooked.

Personal friendships and professional ties would not and would not be perceived to play a role in deciding appropriate action or determining guilt or innocence.

Those charged with abuse, the complainants, the leaders and members of congregations in which the abuse became an issue, district officials, and the general synodical constituency might be more easily assured that all necessary forces were brought to bear to conduct a fair and impartial hearing under the principles laid down in the Scriptures.

All legal requirements and ramifications could be considered and met, thereby lessening the chances that the synod and/or a congregation might become legally liable in case of subsequent litigation or in the event another allegation of sexual misconduct were brought forward against an individual.

Making cases of sexual abuse allegations the business of a special commission might make the congregational and professional reporting of "allegations not founded on fact" less important than they seem to be in the present COP policy.

#### *The "Allegations Not Founded on Fact" Clause in the COP Policy*

Perhaps the primary reason some have protested against the present COP policy is that it asks for the reporting of "allegations which have been determined to be not founded on fact." According to the policy, this reporting is to be done to the Synod by called workers, to calling congregations, and by congregations whose pastor or teacher has been called by another congregation. Some have felt that the reporting of these unsubstantiated allegations is a violation of the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment and of Matthew 18.

We do not entirely share this opinion. While we agree that the reporting of “allegations not based on fact” ought not to be made to a large group of people or in the certification letters to and from congregations in the event of a call, it seems vital that also unsubstantiated allegations be reported to a special commission.

For the sake of the members of the Synod and for the sake of called workers, “allegations not founded on fact” need to be reported to a responsible group. Allegations of this nature may be of several types:

Allegations made in court proceedings in which the accused has been found to be not guilty.

Allegations made to police which are deemed by the police and the district attorney to be “non-winnable” cases.

Obviously, these allegations need to be carefully considered. Despite the not guilty verdict, a called worker may need to be dealt with because of obvious, albeit not legally provable, guilt and/or immorality. For the sake of liability but especially for the sake of souls, these allegations must be known.

Allegations made out of court that reoccur on a worker’s record.

When more than one sexual harassment allegation appears on a person’s record, a red flag ought to go up. The old adage “where there’s smoke, there’s fire” may (or may not) apply. Again, these allegations must be known for the sake of liability but also for the sake of souls.

Allegations which seem to be completely unsubstantiated.

These ought to be reported for the sake of the worker. He needs to be aware of the seriousness of all allegations in this day and age, even seemingly silly ones, and be advised that experts can give him advice should the allegations become more serious.

#### *Instances of Alleged Abuse in the Calling Process*

A concerned question that many have asked is this: “How will information about instances of alleged abused be used in the calling process?”

The present policy indicates that people would not be allowed to be placed on call lists under two circumstances:

There has been a case of verifiable abuse. In this case the worker either would have resigned or been suspended from the ministry.

There is an abuse case pending. Obviously, a person involved in such a situation should not be called until the situation has been resolved.

The COP policy stipulates that calling congregations issue a letter to both the called worker and his/her calling body asking that certification be given stating that no allegations or incidences of sexual abuse have occurred. There has been a concern that calling congregations might be “surprised” after a call was issued to discover that a called worker has been found guilty or is involved in a case of sexual abuse.

The present policy seems to guarantee that congregations will not be surprised in these two matters. No worker will be added to a call list if he has been found guilty of abuse or if an abuse case is pending. Congregations will need to be informed that the certification process which asks questions on these two matters is for the purpose of liability only. For the sake of upholding the dignity of the office of the ministry, it might be suggested that the certification by calling congregations be downplayed. Perhaps the information needs only to be filed and does not need to come before a congregation’s voters assembly at all.

The clause in the policy that has caused concern has to do with workers and congregations reporting “allegations” of abuse. As mentioned before, it seems wise that these instances also be reported. The formation of a responsible commission, however, may allow the deletion of these cases from worker and congregational certification. Perhaps the certification needs only to assert:

There have been no incidences of sexual exploitation/harassment on his/her part of which we are aware.

It seems that a responsible commission would be able to decide whether “unsubstantiated” allegations have any sort of validity. If they do, the commission would consider them “incidents” until a study of the facts had been concluded and the case is resolved. During that process, a person would not be included on call lists. If, in the commission’s opinion, the allegations did not have validity, the commission would opine that there have been no “incidences” of sexual misconduct and the person’s name would not be withheld from call lists. In that case, called workers and congregations could truthfully answer “there have been no incidences of sexual exploitation/harassment on his/her part of which we are aware.”

The commission(s) – and, of course, the Synod – would assume liability in this situation. In an effort to meet all the concerns previously mentioned, the Conference of Presidents and its insurance carrier ought to be moved to assume this liability.

It is likely that some will still feel that the procedures of Matthew 18 are being violated by this reporting. Surely we want to avoid inappropriate allegations and the sharing of secret information. On the other hand, we need to avoid a legalistic interpretation of Jesus’ words about Christian discipline. Perhaps the Seminary faculty can assist the church in this matter by means of a careful study of Matthew 18 as it impacts this and similar situations.

#### *When Abuse Is Admitted by a Called Worker*

In some situations an allegation of abuse or harassment may be admitted by an abuser. In fact, an abuser may in fact confess an incident of sexual abuse without an allegation.

There are obvious pastoral concerns for both the guilty and the victim in these situations. In some way policies ought to include spiritual care for all the people involved.

A very important issue is the abuser's ability to continue service in the public ministry. The present policy stipulates what action is to be taken in the event a pastor or teacher is found guilty of sexual abuse or harassment. We assume that the same action is to be taken if the individual confesses or admits to such a sin:

If it is proven after proper investigation that a called worker is guilty of sexual exploitation/harassment, he/she shall be asked to resign or the calling body shall be asked to have his/her call terminated; the worker shall not be eligible for a call.

The policy seems to indicate that every instance of sexual exploitation/harassment must lead to resignation. As mentioned previously, the Northwest District Policy differentiates between minor and major offenses. For example, a minor offense includes

a situation which is not necessarily unethical but shows poor professional judgment (e.g., a pastor whistling at a college age girl at a camp-out)

an action which is unquestionably inappropriate and unwise but which is not clearly unethical (e.g., a pastor hugging a teenage girl in a joyful or stressful situation)

an unethical action which resulted in relatively minor consequences (e.g., a pastor telling a young teenager a dirty story)

While all of these incidences ought to be added to a person's record in a commission's office, we wonder if the COP intends that all of these incidents must lead to resignation.

### **Proactive Response to Sexual Abuse**

One can understand the sensitivity the Conference of Presidents feels on the issue of sexual misconduct. Although the present policy likely was occasioned by the Minnesota law, there is surely an understanding that the Synod's responsibilities are wider than liability concerns. The fact is that some pastors and congregations, as well-meaning as they may be, may not follow proper procedures in dealing with allegations of sexual abuse or harassment. The presidents are surely concerned that proper steps are followed for the sake of both workers and members of the Synod.

We do not know if the new policy will deal with part-time workers in the congregation, e.g., Sunday School teachers, youth workers, etc. This is an issue that must also be faced by our congregations.

There is surely a need for greater education in this area. Mr. Jon Flanagan, WELS director of personnel, is beginning to prepare materials that are intended to sensitize pastors, teachers, and future church workers on these important issues. Ms. Cooper-White wrote:

The church needs a new ethical code that accurately names and recognizes the prevalence of the problem, offers justice rather than mere sympathy for victims – including clear policies and procedures for the support of victims and mechanisms for restitution – and that re-educates the perpetrators rather than offers them only

sympathy. In conjunction with this treatment, the local church and denominational office has a responsibility to monitor and evaluate the counseling process. They need to outline clear consequences that include censure or suspension, with the goal of preventing harm to others.<sup>92</sup>

May God preserve us from having to deal with this matter, but may he give us wisdom when we must deal with it.

### **In Conclusion**

The objective of the five essays in this series on “Issues in Parish Education” was to identify a number of challenges which present themselves to today’s church in the area of Christian education. It was not the author’s intention to supply all of the answers to the questions raised in these essays. Every one of the congregations in our Synod and all our pastors are going to have to study these issues and search out the solutions that best answer the questions in their specific ministries. While doctrinal principles come to bear on these issues, the solutions themselves are not necessarily a part of doctrine but of sanctified Christian judgment and common sense.

The essays that have been presented over the past weeks likely have seemed negative from time to time, although it has not been the essayist’s goal to be a forecaster of doom. The challenges are serious, of course; I did not hesitate to call them “crises” in the introductory essay. We can address them confidently, however, and with serious determination because the one who has commissioned us to “teach them to obey everything I have commanded you” has also promised, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

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<sup>92</sup> Cooper-White, p. 199.