

# **The Pastor, Synod, and Other Agencies: Cooperation or Competition**

## **The Attitude of the Pastor toward Synodical Decisions, Policies, and Programs and the Relationship of the Pastor to Synodical Leaders**

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There are several reasons why I have added a subtitle to the assigned title of this paper. For one thing, the phrase “other agencies” in the assigned title usually in our circles refers to something like an area Lutheran high school, Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service, Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministry, or other “church related organizations” such as WELS Kingdom Workers and WELS Lutherans for Life. In the interest of narrowing the scope of this paper I have chosen not to delve into the relationship between the pastor or local congregation and these “other agencies.” Secondly, I have added the subtitle because the assigned title lends itself toward the assumption that this essay will include an in-depth study of the twin doctrines of church and ministry. While that kind of study is always profitable, much has already been written on those twin doctrines and their application to the relationship between synod and the local congregation and their application to the role of the pastor and other forms of representative ministry. But the main reason why I added the subtitle is to give you advance notice regarding the major emphasis of this paper. When the member of your conference program committee called and asked if I would be willing to write on the topic, he offered the title and then added the explanation that the program committee’s real interest was in getting at this business of pastor-synod relations.

### **Overview of the Doctrine of Church and Ministry**

The biblical truths and principles involved in the doctrine of church and ministry form the foundation and back-drop of this paper. If you haven’t restudied these important truths and principles recently, please do so. “Where to begin,” you ask? “How do I go about such a re-study?” Well, this is a WELS pastoral conference. The obvious answer to those questions is, “*Ad fontes!*” “Go to the source of all doctrine for faith and life!” “*To the law and the testimony!*” (Is 8:20) That mindset, that “back-to-the Bible” approach to doctrine, is what we have come to know as Wauwatosa theology.

Thank God for our heritage. But what good is a heritage if you don’t know it, understand it, or make it your own? “We dare not take for granted the heritage our forefathers have left us. Each generation needs to make the truths of Scripture its own.”<sup>1</sup> Our heritage is not really a body of theological essays, a line up of *Quarterlies* on the top shelf in our office, or a stack of three-ring notebooks full of “dog” notes collecting dust in the attic. Our theological heritage has more to do with one primary principle for Bible interpretation, “Let Scripture interpret Scripture.” That is Wauwatosa theology. Adolf Hoenecke set the torch in place. Joh. Ph. Koehler, August Pieper, and John Schaller ignited it. Joh. P. Meyer, Carl Lawrenz, and other men of God carried it forward to the generations of pastors currently serving in the WELS.

In order to re-study these important doctrines of church and ministry I would strongly encourage every pastor to sit down with his Stuttgart text and UBS or Nestle text on the one side and the “WELS Ministry Compendium” on the other, not because the Compendium is God-breathed but because the eight hundred some pages of the thirty-two essays in the Compendium ooze the spirit and mindset of young Samuel, “*Speak, [LORD], for your servant is listening.*” (1 Sm 3:10); the spirit and mindset of the royal official who “*took Jesus at his word.*” (Jn 4:50); the spirit and mindset of Peter, “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.*” (Jn 6:68-69); the spirit and mindset of Mary “*who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said.*” (Lk 10:39). If you have given even passing thought to this topic of pastor-synod relations, or if you have had countless discussions with brothers in ministry about “synod” and “synodical decisions, policies, and programs,” then read, learn, and take to heart the marvels of our

Lord Jesus Christ and his Church as set forth in Scripture and as clearly and carefully expounded in the “WELS Ministry Compendium.”

To get an overview of the doctrine of church and ministry in preparation for our look at pastor-synod relations, we simply turn to our WELS “Theses on the Church and Ministry,” available for ready reference in a separate pamphlet, in the *Quarterly* (vol. 67, April, 1970) and in the Compendium (p. 333 ff.). In an essay presented at the Michigan District convention in 1984, Prof. John M. Brenner did a fine job of summarizing those theses:

1. The church is the communion of saints, the entire number of those whom the Holy Spirit has brought to faith in Jesus as their Savior. Since only believers are in the church, the church is of necessity invisible.
2. The church, though invisible, is present wherever the gospel is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments are rightly administered (the marks of the church). The church is established, strengthened and extended only through the means of grace.
3. It is God’s will that Christians gather around the means of grace to perform the tasks assigned to the church, but he has not prescribed the specific forms of those gatherings. Every gathering of Christians around the means of grace to carry out the work of the church is church.
4. The ministry of the keys was given by our Lord to each individual Christian. Wherever Christians are gathered they have the right to call individuals to exercise the keys publicly in their name. Our Lord has ordained this public ministry, but he has not prescribed any specific form for it.<sup>ii</sup>

Brenner’s conclusions are ours:

Our synod is also church because it has the marks of the church. It is a gathering of Christians around the means of grace to carry out the great commission. The outward form or organization is different from the local congregation, but the essence of the church remains. The only difference is in the scope of the work each carries out...Synods are formed to assist congregations in those activities they would find difficult to do by themselves....

When we gather as Christians in a local congregation, we call pastors, teachers, Sunday School teachers, elders, church council members, etc. to administer the keys publicly in our name. As we gather as Christians in a synod, we call professors, administrators, synodical and district presidents, etc. to administer the keys in our name. As God in his grace causes a congregation or synod to grow, Christians will often find it necessary to call more workers, often to very specific tasks in a wide variety of offices. The difference in these offices is not that some are in the public ministry and others are not. The difference is in the scope of their call, in the specific work they are asked to do in the name of the Christians who have called them. This difference in the scope of the call, however, does not imply a difference in rank among the various called workers.<sup>iii</sup>

I believe that there is widespread agreement among us on these Scriptural truths. Within the last year or so I have heard a few brothers in the pastoral ministry make statements that betray some unclarity regarding the pastoral office in relationship to other forms of representative ministry. I have encouraged those with whom I have spoken to do some homework and to ask Prof. John Brug for a copy of a study paper he presented at our September, 1993, Board for Parish Services meeting in which he made a strong case for classifying most of the recent unclarity in our circles as semantic confusion and not differences in doctrine. I have also heard rumors that there are some who have expressed concerns that studies and discussions on other forms of representative ministry somehow indicate a denigration of the pastoral office. In that case I would refer them to Pastor Tom Nass’s paper, “The Pastoral Ministry as a Distinct Form of the Public Ministry,” which he presented at your

September, 1993, conference, in which he captured the spirit of New Testament freedom in regard to forms of representative ministry while at the same time upholding the relevance and significance for our day and age of the form of representative ministry most familiar to us, the office of the pastor.

If we have doctrinal agreement on the doctrine of church and ministry, then what's the problem? Why do we need a paper on pastor-synod relations. The search for an answer to that question leads us to the second part of this paper.

### **The Relationship of the Pastor to the Synod**

Since we have general agreement in our circles regarding the doctrine of the church and its application to a specific form of "church" which we call synod, and since we have general agreement in our circles regarding the doctrine of ministry and its application to a specific form of representative ministry which we call "pastor," I submit that when tensions arise, when problems come up, and when disagreements occur, they usually fall under the heading of the word "relationship." There are actually several relationships we need to consider. The first is the relationship of the congregation to the synod. The second is the relationship of the pastor to the synod as a whole. The third is the relationship of (really, the attitude of) the pastor toward synodical decisions, policies, and programs. The fourth is the relationship of the pastor to synodical leaders.

#### *The Relationship of the Congregation to the Synod*

For a summary we turn to the WELS "Theses on Church and Ministry:"

In essence the various groupings in Jesus' name for the proclamation of his gospel all lie on the same plane. They are all church in one and the same sense, namely in this sense that on the basis of the marks of the church the Lord lets us apprehend the presence of the *una sancta* (the Holy Christian Church) in each such grouping of people, and thus enables us to acknowledge them as gatherings of believers possessing the ministry of the keys with the right of exercising this ministry *in accordance with love and order*. *Here we need to distinguish between the possession of a right and the God-pleasing exercise of that right*. As the Holy Spirit leads Christians to group themselves together in Jesus' name...he always constrains them to do so *in an orderly manner* (1 Cor 14:33,40) *and in the spirit of love* (1 Cor 16:14). The Holy Spirit never leads Christians to group themselves together in Jesus' name for competitive purposes so as to duplicate, hinder, or disturb that scope of the ministry of the keys which is already effectively provided for by a previously established grouping of Christians. Every added grouping of Christians in Jesus' name, as effected by the Holy Spirit, will be for the purpose of assisting the primary groupings in exercising certain phases of the ministry of the keys more fully and more efficiently in keeping with the great commission of the Lord...or for the purpose of providing needed strengthening through Word and sacrament which, because of special circumstances, is not adequately offered or cannot well be offered through already existing groupings.

The more fully also the secondary groupings of Christians remain conscious of their essential character as Church, the more keenly they will feel their responsibility of functioning in accordance with love and good order and thus carefully restrict themselves to those phases of the ministry of the keys which would otherwise fail to receive the attention that they deserve.<sup>iv</sup>

[emphasis mine]

Prof. Brenner writes, "Since congregation and synod are both church, they exist for the same purpose—the proclamation of the gospel. They are not, however, in competition with each other, but complement each other. They are not in competition with each other, but have different spheres of activity."<sup>v</sup> Again I don't believe that we have any disagreement with this application of the doctrine of the church.

### *The Relationship of the Pastor to the Synod as a Whole*

Professors Habeck and Schuetze have this to say in *The Shepherd under Christ*:

Since the organizational form of a synod is not determined by Scripture, formal membership will vary according to the wishes and good judgment of each church body. The WELS has found it expedient to set up its synodical organization in such a way that individual congregations, pastors, and male teachers make up its formal membership. Thus the individual Christian in a congregation is a member of the synod through his congregation, whereas the pastors and male teachers join as members directly. The voting delegates at a synodical convention thus consist of laymen from congregations, of pastors, and of male teachers.

This type of organization provides for a pastor-congregation-synod relationship which establishes a direct link between each congregation and the synod and between each pastor, or male teacher, and the synod. Thus the congregation is joined to the synod, not through its pastor, but directly as a member, and the pastor personally is a member of the synod and not merely through his congregation...

In this way this kind of pastor-congregation-synod relationship, when used properly, can provide opportunities for brotherly help and encouragement in problems that the church militant still experiences.<sup>vi</sup>

Once again, I don't believe we have any major disagreement in this area of application of the doctrine of church and ministry.

### *The Relationship of (the Attitude of) the Pastor toward Synodical Decisions, Policies, & Programs*

At this time in our synod's history when some pastors have expressed grave concerns about synodical decisions, policies, and programs, the question is appropriate, "How are we to react to synodical decisions, policies, and programs with which we do not agree?" I believe that there are several key truths to keep in mind. For one thing, we need to remember and review daily the apostle's words, "*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*" (Eph 4:3). For another thing, we need to be clear on what is an adiaphoron and what isn't. For example, no where in Scripture does God command that future pastors learn the original languages of the Bible, nor does he prescribe the curriculum for the training of future pastors. However, Jesus does want his followers to "*hold to his teaching*" (Jn 8:31). Therefore, teaching future pastors the historical-grammatical method of Bible interpretation based on a solid, personal, working knowledge of the Bible's original languages is an issue so greatly treasured by us that it has moved beyond an adiaphoron to a "given." Yet, the location or campus where we teach Biblical languages is an adiaphoron.

Professors Schuetze and Habeck offer a comment about a congregation's reaction toward a synodical decision regarding an adiaphoron. The comment could just as well be applied to pastors as to congregations:

In matters not decided by Scripture a congregation will *accept the majority decision of its synod*. For each congregation to decide individually which program it chooses to support and which to eliminate would put an end to effective cooperation among the member congregations. It is self-evident that a congregation should not, however, blindly follow decisions that involve matters of conscience and confession to the truth. The congregation which believes that its synod has erred from Scripture has the responsibility of brotherly admonition toward its brothers in the synod.<sup>vii</sup> [emphasis mine]

While not always agreeing on synodical decisions, policies, and programs, I think we can agree on the principles of adiaphora and at least in theory accept the concept of going with the will majority.

### *The Relationship of the Pastor to Synodical Leaders*

Here's where we begin to run into some tensions, problems, and disagreements. This business of tension between pastors and synodical leaders is not new. The Protestant Controversy of the late 1920's and early 1930's came at a time in our nation's history "of anti-establishment and the establishment was on the defensive, if not on the run."<sup>viii</sup> That mindset played into the controversy which centered in large measure on some pastors' discomfort with *Beamtentum*, "official-dom." Add to the mix the fact that the merger of the Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Nebraska Synods had just taken place in 1917, and the leaders in the new Wisconsin districts who were attempting to handle the controverted issues were relatively "new" and unseasoned in their leadership roles and lacked both experience in dealing with difficult cases as well as the confidence of the pastors in the parishes.

The relationship of the congregation to the synod and the pastor to synodical leaders had to be re-stated and re-clarified in the 1950's and 1960's as the tension in the Synodical Conference came to a boil. Although the official break with the Missouri Synod came over the doctrine of fellowship, it's obvious that the seeds for the break were sown by differences in the doctrine of church and ministry.

Tension in the relationship between pastors and synodical leaders came up again in the 1970's. In a 1976 pastoral conference essay entitled "The Congregation's Relationship to the Synod" our current district president, David Rutschow, wrote:

Enter something like the pre-budget subscription/stewardship material, with its system of individual congregation goals, sent out from Milwaukee. Suddenly the congregation-synod relationship gets a bit involved and sticky, even among pastors. The statements like these are voiced: "No one has the right to come in and tell our congregation how to run its stewardship program, much less presume to set the amount of our financial stewardship for programs outside the congregation. Not even the synod has that right. That's for our congregation to decide and set. That's the trouble with our synod today. It's getting too many men behind desks in Milwaukee trying to tell us what to do and how to run our congregations. So we just take mail like that from Milwaukee and deposit it in our circular file!"<sup>ix</sup>

You can fill in the blank with the latest hot topic which seems to illustrate tension between some pastors and synodical leaders. For example, I think it's fair to say that some pastors are not happy with the amalgamation issue, and their unhappiness has been translated into tension in their relationship with synodical leaders. The current mood of distrust toward synodical leaders was also evidenced in the report of the Committee on Program Review. The impetus for the committee's appointment in the first place came from pastors who believe that our synod is top heavy. Yet after careful, extensive, and objective analysis the committee reported that our synod is not top heavy, even though a majority of the pastors responding to their survey think it is.

Why do these tensions persist in spite of the fact that we have doctrinal agreement? I believe one area that needs special study is the biblical definition of "leadership" and the corresponding role which, for the time being, I will call "the *hypotasso* role."

What do I mean by "the biblical definition of leadership?" There are several words in the New Testament that help us build the definition:

*proistemi* "stand in front of; be over; superintend" (picture of a leader who is not behind pushing but is out in front, yet not so far in front as to become a target)

	Ro 12:8	“leadership”
	1 Tm 3:4,12	“manage”
	1 Tm 5:17	“direct the affairs”
	1 Th 5:12	“be over”
<i>hegeomai</i>	“go before; rule; have authority over” (synonym of <i>proistemi</i> ) He 13:7,17	
<i>episkopos</i>	“someone charged with the responsibility of seeing that things to be done are done” 1 Tm 3:2; Tt 1:7; 1 Pt 5:2	
<i>poimen</i>	“shepherd” (whose role is to lead, feed, and give heed) Ps 23; 1 Pt 5:2	
<i>kephale</i>	“head” (a guiding and directing activity) Eph 1:22; 4:15; 1 Cor 11:3	

Those words in the passages listed give us one part of the biblical definition of leadership. Those to whom God assigns a leadership role do indeed have the responsibility, in fact, are accountable to God (He 13:17), for taking the initiative, for setting the pace and tone, for offering guidance and direction for the people whom they serve. But one more important aspect of the definition is missing.

That aspect is supplied when we study Mk 10:35-45. James and John approached Jesus and requested positions of leadership in his kingdom. They were wrong on two accounts. First, they had a wrong view of his kingdom. They thought that he was going to Jerusalem to establish some sort of earthly kingdom. Secondly, they had an erroneous understanding of “leadership.” Having overheard the request, the other ten disciples became indignant, “How dare those two try to get ahead of us!” At that point Jesus, ever the patient and loving Teacher, called all his disciples close to himself and said:

It’s time for us to have a little chat. Have a seat, boys, and listen up. I want to explain something that you really need to know. It has to do with this leadership business. Here’s how it works in the world: Those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over people, and their high officials exercise authority over them. That’s the way it is, isn’t it? In the world words like authority, control, and “in charge” take on a negative connotation. Even the word “leadership” carries a negative connotation for most folks. In the world people who are leaders, who are entrusted with authority, who are “in charge,” tend to pick on those below, step on the little people, operate in a top-down mode, and give others the distinct impression, “It’s my way or the highway!”

But not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant (*diakonos*), and whoever wants to be first must be slave (*doulos*) of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. That’s what greatness in my kingdom is all about. That’s true biblical, Christ-like leadership. Being a leader does not mean “wielding” authority. Being a leader does not mean stepping on people or demanding your way. In my kingdom the pyramid turns upside down. The leaders are underneath serving and upholding everyone else. In my kingdom leaders are to serve as I served. You know I could have come into the world, snapped my mighty fingers, and demanded that everyone and everything bow down to me. But I didn’t do that. Instead, I came into the world to give—of myself. I came into the world knowing full well that all humans need to be loved and accepted, need worth and significance, and would be left alone forever because by their nature

and by their actions they are unlovable and unacceptable before God, unworthy before God, and deserve to be abandoned by God. But I am the Son of Man, the true God-man, the ultimate Leader. And the best way I can exercise my leadership is not to push people around or tell them what to do, but to serve them, to take responsibility for meeting all their needs, to take the initiative in selfless love, and to give of myself.

That's leadership, true biblical leadership: "having the responsibility for (in fact, being accountable to God for) taking the initiative in selfless love and service." Thus a person who is serving as a leader will first of all remember that he is follower of Christ Jesus and then will have "*the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant*" (Php 2:5-7), and will want to "*take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ*" (2 Cor 10:5).

Since our God is a God of order and infinite wisdom, he has seen fit to establish order in the world: in society, in government, in the home, and in the visible the church. Why? So leaders can take advantage of people? So leaders can get honor and glory by stepping over and on others? So leaders can run roughshod over other people's feelings and ideas? No! God established order in the world so that he can channel blessings to people.

Is it true that sin may at times get in the way? Is it true that the God-established order sometimes gets botched and broken? Is it true that sometimes leaders pick on the people they are to be serving, step on toes, force their opinions, swing their weight around, and make people feel insignificant? Is it true that leaders sometimes become passive, inactive, and neglect their responsibilities leaving the people they are to serve floundering, wandering, wondering, rudderless, confused, and in anarchy? Yes! When good order gets goofed up, that's a reminder that this world is not the be-all-end-all of our existence.

But the presence and reality of sin doesn't abrogate God's good and gracious will. He still wants order, and he still wants leaders to be true leaders, accountable to him and responsible for taking the initiative in selfless love so that the people being served have all their needs met—not pushing down from the top, not pulling or pushing from the side, but underneath, doing everything possible so that the people they serve feel loved and accepted, significant, and are not alone. That is true biblical leadership, exercising authority according to God's will. And that's the mindset toward leadership the Lord brings to the church. That's how he wants spiritual leaders to function.

Every pastor knows that in the local congregation he is a spiritual leader. The pastor who tells you, "I'm not the leader here. I'm the shepherd of this flock," either doesn't realize that one major aspect of shepherding is leading (Ps 23) or doesn't understand the biblical definition of leadership. A parish pastor knows that besides the soul care he wants to offer to each and every member of the congregation, besides the "soul food" he offers to young and old alike, he is responsible for providing guidance and direction. Are you aware of cases in which the pastor has abdicated his leadership role and is basically quite passive and silent when it comes to offering guidance and direction as the congregation looks for more and more ways to serve God and people? If so, my guess is that congregation is in trouble. Are you aware of cases in which the pastor abuses his leadership role and exercises leadership in a tyrannical, dictatorial, domineering fashion? If so, my guess is that congregation is in trouble.

Note that on the congregational level the definition of biblical leadership applies not only to the pastor but also to all the other spiritual leaders in the congregation, each functioning within the sphere of his call. For example, church councilmen are to be spiritual leaders. Do you know of a church council that meets monthly just to hear a report on what the pastor is doing and to assign him more duties? If so, my guess is that pastor is tired and frustrated, and that congregation is not functioning in a way God would want. Do you know of a church in which certain church councilmen or church leaders or ex-leaders make sure that everything has to go their way? If so, my guess is that pastor is frustrated and the members of that congregation are uncomfortable, if not upset.

You see, even if a pastor has never done a specific study of the topic of biblical leadership to come up with his own succinct working definition, he does know what biblical leadership is. He does know that it is important to offer guidance and direction for his congregation. He does know that there are two ways in which a person can blow it when it comes to leadership: either high-handedness/dominance or absence/passivity. If that is true, and I believe it is, why does it seem that we have a problem applying the concept of biblical leadership to our relationship with synodical leaders?

One possible explanation is that synodical leaders may not have always carried out their leadership as God would want. If that is the case, then it is our responsibility to do whatever we can to help them carry out their leadership role in a God-pleasing way. Then we approach them with the spirit and pattern Jesus lays out in Matthew 18. But I need to inject a comment. God in his amazing grace has allowed me the privilege of working with several of our synodical and district leaders over the last few years, and I can honestly say that I have never met individuals more dedicated to carrying out their leadership role along the lines of the biblical definition given above.

Another possible explanation why we have trouble applying the concept of biblical leadership to our relationship with synodical leaders is that there may have been times in our synod's history when leaders could have done a better job of gaining input and building consensus. Since I believe that leaders are responsible for setting the tone, pace, mood, and atmosphere for the group they serve and are responsible for providing the framework for forward-mindedness, I also believe that it makes good sense for leaders to gain input from the people they serve so they can assess the needs of the people and offer decisions, policies, and programs which will not only be appropriate but be accepted. Gaining and valuing input go a long way toward building consensus. An illustration is the widespread acceptance of our new hymnal. When worship leaders in our synod sensed the need for a new hymnal in the 1970's and early 1980's, what do you think would have been the chances for widespread acceptance if a half dozen of them sat down and cranked out a new hymnal and introduced it at the synod convention of 1983? But the 1985 convention decision for a new hymnal was preceded by extensive writing, study, and publicity. After the decision was made the committee took eight years in painstaking study, publicity, pilot projects, field testing, and gathered (and valued) widespread input. One wonders whether synodical leaders who had spent decades in the study of our synodical school system ended up with research and reports which were important, accurate, and telling but largely internal, in-house, and not widely known. By the time a decision was made in the 1991 convention the reaction among the rank and file was everything from incredulity to "It's about time. Let's do it ASAP." A final affirmation two years later seems to me to be a short time for consensus-building on such a volatile subject. Please! Please! Don't misread me. I'm not trying to put salt in wounds, cast aspersions, or even quibble with the decision. I'm simply using the situation to illustrate the importance of "process" when it comes to exercising leadership in the area of consensus-building. At our congregation the leaders try not to bring an issue to a vote until they have done their homework and built such a consensus that when it's time to vote, everyone knows what the outcome will be. The reality is that the bigger the organization, the more difficult it is to build consensus simply because of the size of the organization and the administrative nightmare of keeping consensus machinery well-oiled and working.

[See Appendix A]

Another possible explanation why we have a problem applying the concept of biblical leadership to our relationship with synodical leaders is that pastors may not have given careful attention to or are uncomfortable being in what I call "the *hypotasso* role." Let me explain. Our God is a God of order. In his infinite wisdom he has seen fit to establish order in human relationships—in the work place, in the administration of secular government, in marriage, in the visible church. God has assigned leadership roles to employers, rulers, husbands, and spiritual leaders in the church. God has assigned the *hypotasso* role to employees (1 Pt 2:18), citizens (Ro 13:1-7; 1 Pt 2:13), wives (Eph 5:22-24; 1 Pt 3:1), and members of the church (He 13:17). *Hypotasso* has something to do with "acquiescence in a divinely willed order [and a] readiness to renounce one's own will for the sake of others."<sup>x</sup> *Hypotasso* has a close relationship with *tapeinos*. The definition I usually use is "put yourself in a position, arrange yourself in such a way, so as to catch all the blessings coming



your way, and develop an attitude that says, ‘I will be willing to defer, to acquiesce, for the sake of the greater good of the unit.’” A clear understanding of both the leadership role and the *hypotasso* role have huge practical implications for the relationship between men and women, employers and employees, governing rulers and citizens, husbands and wives, parents and children, and spiritual leaders and members of the church. When a person finds himself or herself in the *hypotasso* role, he or she is under obligation to develop an attitude of joy, love, and respect in relation to the person(s) in the leadership role with whom he or she is connected and is under obligation to provide a context of cooperation so that the person(s) in the leadership role can function with joy. The unique thing about the role of the pastor is that he is in the leadership role in relation to the members of the congregation he serves, and he is in the *hypotasso* role in relation to synodical leaders. That means we parish pastors need to work consistently on our attitude and on our effort to provide a context of cooperation for the spiritual leaders who serve us.

Outside of this discussion of biblical leadership and its application to our relationship with synodical leaders, there may be a psychological reason why tension keeps creeping up in the pastor-synodical leaders relationship. Think of this scenario: the pastor is working his tail off, giving his all for the Lord and the people he serves, expending nearly every ounce of energy in faithful service to God without a whole lot of visible fruit. He just spent six consecutive weeks in marriage counseling with the same couple, and they still got a divorce. An elder says, “I was too busy to make my calls this month. I’ll get at the list next month.” Two ushers failed to show up for the early service so guess who has to change the hymn numbers last minute as worshipers are arriving. Three councilmen are worried about financial short-fall, are clamoring for eliminating a teacher, and haven’t got a clue about long term spiritual growth for the congregation much less any desire for personal participation in Bible study. No one over the age of seventeen is willing to teach Sunday School. The phone rings during lunch again, and its the woman who is worried about demon possession and is about to commence her sixth attempt at suicide. While all this is going on, the pastor is trying to maintain a healthy marriage relationship with his wife and foster an enduring relationship with his children. Then along comes the mail with another packet of materials from the synod for dissemination or publication or immediate attention or careful consideration, and the pastor begins to read between the lines, “‘They’ want me to be doing better!” Finally the pastor feels a bit overwhelmed. Personal insecurity and fear start to rattle around in the brain. The materials offered by synodical leaders are good and useful, but what that pastor really needs is a Christian brother who will put an arm around his shoulder and say, “It’s OK. God is still in the heavens. *Vivit!* You’re doing a good job. How can I help?” With brotherly help the pastor will be able to accept his limitations, rekindle the desire for on-going spiritual and professional growth, and receive offered help with openness and appreciation.

Another possible reason tension keeps creeping up in the pastor-synodical leaders relationship is the failure on the part of both pastors and synodical leaders to, appreciate the implications of Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. “*Es gibt allerlei Menschen in Gottes Menagerie,*” Grandma would say. We aren’t all the same. (Good thing!) And not only are our gifts, talents, and abilities different. The way we look at things and the way we go about doing things is different, shaped by our core values and experiences. If I vicared in Smallville, USA, serving blue collar workers and shut-ins, and you vicared in Uptown, USA, serving upwardly mobile executives and wealthy empty-nesters, the way you initiate a new program and train volunteers or teach a Bible class and the way I initiate a new program and train volunteers or teach a Bible class may be radically different, even though we both proclaim the one and the same gospel. Then again, maybe tension in pastor-synodical leaders relationships isn’t due to a lack of appreciation of our differences. Maybe our memories are just too good. “I remember that guy in school. He was such a ...” Pastors and synodical leaders need to develop the kind of selective memory God has when he says, “*I will forgive your wickedness and remember your sins no more*” (Jr 31:34).

Before we point any fingers, I believe that it’s essential for each of us, whether serving as a parish pastor or serving in a synodical office, to review the personal reality of these words from the apostle, “*I find this to be the rule: When I want to do what is right, evil is there with me. In my inner being I delight in God’s Law, but all through the members of my body I see another law fighting against the Law in my mind and making me a prisoner to the law of sin which exists in the members of my body. What a miserable person I am!... On the one*

*hand I serve the Law of God with my mind [new converted nature and attitude], but on the other I serve the law of sin with my flesh [my old unconverted nature and attitude]" (Ro 7:21-25 NET). Each of us has to drag that old Adam around every day. When Christian people, Christian brothers, Christian brothers in ministry agree on doctrine and practice and still experience tensions, problems, and disagreements in their relationship with one another, let's realize that the underlying problem is the sinful nature which each of us still has. There's no way we will be able to heal tensions, problems, and disagreements in relationships unless each of us takes personal ownership of the problem—"my sin, my egocentrism, my selfishness, my sinful nature, my desire to have things go my way are the problem. I am the chief of sinners." Only then will we be able to appreciate the life-giving, energizing, healing power of Jesus' unfathomable forgiveness. "Who will rescue me from this body which brings death? Thanks be to God—He does it through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (Ro 7:24-25).*

In order to heal a relationship that has gone sour, we need to begin by applying law and gospel to ourselves. Then we need to re-learn the art of applying law and gospel to others in the most appropriate way. I recall hearing Seminary professors remind us of Luther's statement that dividing law and gospel are the highest theological art. That used to puzzle me. Any seven year old little Lutheran can tell when a passage is law and when another passage is gospel. Not until I had people sitting in my office spilling the sordid details of their life did I realize what Luther meant. It's not just distinguishing which passages are bad news and which ones are good news. It's knowing how and when to apply law and gospel with the right kind of tone at the right time that is the theological art. Do you think we could use a little more of that art, coupled with a healthy dose of common sense and tact, as we deal with brothers in the ministry? Pastor Kurt Koeplin did. He once wrote:

Yet another prevailing spirit [in our synod] that bothers and bewilders me is our chainsaw wit. Too many of us have graduated summa cum laude from the "Don Rickles Charm School of Hockey Pucks and Put Downs." We are good at it!...A young seminarian, a former editor of the "Black and Red," once wrote: "We have plenty of negative criticism around. 'Northwestern humor' is supposed to be famous for witty mockery. We are all pretty professional at cutting down whatever we set our minds to' ('Black and Red,' September, 1983)."<sup>xi</sup>

I don't want to disappoint you, but the truth is that this essay together with all the other essays written on the subject will not be able to resolve the problems when tensions come up in the pastor-synodical leaders relationship. I do believe, however, there are some issues we need to work at faithfully, persistently, and consistently:

- Stay fresh on the doctrine of church and ministry.
- Adopt common terminology for the various forms of church and ministry so that we don't talk past each other in semantic confusion.
- Keep in mind WELS church history (history tends to repeat itself).
- Understand that differences can occur among brothers regarding assumptions and paradigms while we share the same doctrine and preserve unity in faith.
- Continue to work at understanding and applying the principles of biblical leadership and the *hypotasso* role.
- Continue to review and apply the principles involving adiaphora so that we agree on what may change, what must change, and what dare never change.

Pastor Kurt Koeplin had a different list:

- a) Turn up the fires of Christian love we have for each other; turn down the demeaning criticism.
- b) Turn up gentlemanly civility when we speak to or of each other; turn down the judgmental rhetoric.
- c) Turn up trust; annihilate suspicion.

- d) Respect each other as servants of the Most High God; do not see your mission in life to keep everyone else humble.
- e) Monitor our humor and witticisms; avoid savagery like the AIDS plague!
- f) Speak well of and put the best construction on...motives, programs, and policies of our synod; do not assume “them” guilty until proven innocent.
- g) Begin all evaluations and judgments with the “givens” that all of our God appointed leaders are people of honor and integrity with hearts and motives as pure as our own.<sup>xii</sup>

This whole matter of pastor-synodical leaders relationships brings to mind a subject that we may not have time to pursue, but I’ll open the can of worms anyway. In recent years I have become more personally aware of the incredibly loving, faithful, and dedicated work of our circuit pastors. We ask them to do a lot, and most of it has to do with handling time-consuming, difficult cases. I have also become aware of the huge work load piled on our district presidents. In our district, for example, the district president spends seventy percent of his ministry time doing district work. The can of worms is this—If pastor-synod relations are important, wouldn’t it make sense to find a way to free up the district president so that he could spend more time working with the circuits pastors in a proactive, preventive mode instead of in a reactive, “squirt-out-the-fires” mode? Is it time to reconsider realignment of circuits into five or so congregations? Or is that impractical? Mission counselors are now spending the majority of their time with new starts. Mission pastors of other mission congregations are pretty much on their own. So are pastors of established congregations, for that matter. Is there a way to expand the role of the mission counselor or the number of mission counselors so that one or two veteran men work as regional counselors hand-in-glove with the district presidents, serving established congregations in a counseling mode? Can we add the Seminary to the picture and tie their programs for continuing education in with the support and help from a regional counselor, district president, and circuit pastor? While we are at it, let’s add to the picture the Board for Parish Services administrators who are not only more than willing to provide personal on-site advice and support but are already doing that. Did you know that over the last three and a half years Board for Parish Services administrators have provided direct, on-site help to over four hundred congregations? Those guys are not just sitting behind their desks at 2929 stuffing envelopes with materials to mail to our circular files!

I appreciate the opportunity to offer some musings on pastor-synod relations. What’s at stake is our desire to work together in love so that we can not only enjoy mutual support through our bond of faith but also pool our resources, talents, gifts, and abilities in the best possible way so that more and more people can join in the new song of salvation.

*“Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For whoever would love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. Let him turn from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer...The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each one receives his gift, serve others as good stewards of the various gifts of God. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it out of the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Pt 3:8-12; 4:7-11).*

## **Appendix A: Additional comments following discussion of the paper at the conference**

Another possible explanation why we have a problem applying the concept of biblical leadership to our relationship with synodical leaders is that there is confusion regarding the “both-and” of who under God is commanded to exercise the keys. Let me explain. In a local congregation the gathered believers do not call spiritual leaders to do all the work for them or tell them what to do. Rather, it’s a “both-and” situation. They have personal responsibility for using the “keys” to grow in faith and for carrying out the Great Commission, *and* they enjoy the blessings that come through having spiritual leaders who are called to nurture the faith of the people they serve (1 Pt 5:2) and to equip them for service (Eph 4:12). In a synod the gathered believers or groups of believers (congregations) do not call spiritual leaders to do all the work for them or tell them what to do. Rather, it’s a “both-and” situation. Individual Christians and individual congregations have the responsibility for growth in faith and for serving the Lord and others, and they enjoy the blessings that come through having spiritual leaders.

In that connection the question may come up, “Are synodical leaders to provide guidance and direction only in matters of faith and doctrine or also in matters of adiaphora?” Obviously, in matters of faith and doctrine synodical leaders are called upon to say, “Thus says the Lord.” Yet, they will not be doing that in a hierarchical manner. When the church body decides that it would be a good idea to clarify a certain doctrine of Scripture (e.g. church fellowship; the role of men and women), the entire church will likely call on synodical leaders to take the lead in the study and developing clear statements, but those leaders will call on the members of the synod to participate in the study and clarification. In every case involving faith and doctrine synodical leaders who carry out their role biblically and lovingly will never be papistic or hierarchical, but their efforts will be focused on, “What does God have to say?” In matters that are adiaphora I believe that synodical leaders do have the responsibility to provide guidance and direction but, again, never in a “top-down” way. We can see how that would work in a congregation. A pastor will provide guidance and direction in matters of adiaphora to the degree that he is able. For example, he may provide very minimal guidance and direction when it comes to construction of a new school building for the congregation’s Lutheran elementary, but he may provide significant guidance and direction when it comes to deciding the percentage of offerings committed to synod, or the ushering pattern for communion distribution, or the symbolism on chancel paraments.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Brenner, John M. "The Congregation in Its Relationship to the Synod" (essay delivered at the WELS MI District Convention), June, 1984, p. 1.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2, 4, 5.
- <sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8, 14, 15.
- <sup>iv</sup> "Theses on Church and Ministry." WELS Ministry Compendium, 1992, p. 337-338.
- <sup>v</sup> Brenner. *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- <sup>vi</sup> Habeck, I. and A. Schuetze. *The Shepherd under Christ*. NPH, 1974, p. 355-357.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.
- <sup>viii</sup> Fredrich, E.C. *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*. NPH, 1992, p. 109 ff.
- <sup>ix</sup> Rutschow, David. "The Congregation's Relationship to the Synod." Pastoral Conference essay, October, 1976, p. 1.
- <sup>x</sup> Friedrich, Gerhard, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. VIII. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 1972, p. 43, 45.
- <sup>xi</sup> Koeplin, Kurt F. "Synod Loyalty" (paper presented at the Metro-North pastoral conference), January, 1988, p. 4.
- <sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

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