

Guidelines for Receiving New Members into the Church

[Platt Circuit Nebraska District Geneva, Nebraska, September 23, 1975]

by Robert G. Otto

In heeding our Lord's admonitions "Go ye, therefore, and make disciples of all nations..." it stands to reason that each congregation and pastor be concerned about reaching the unchurched in his community to share with them God's grace. Whether the congregation undertakes this task with an extensive evangelism program or as concerned individuals is really not important. But that the work is done—that the unchurched are reached and led to Jesus, their Savior is of the highest importance.

This paper, however, is not intended to discuss the importance of evangelism or to encourage one another in evangelism—this encouragement is well known to us (Matt. 28:19 and 20, Mark 16:15, II Tim. 4:2ff). This paper finds its importance in the question, "what do we do when the Gospel has been presented and your prospect requests membership?" What rules, what guidelines can we use? Or as the theme committee stated it, "Guidelines for receiving new members into the church."

We shall discuss this topic under three parts. The first part is, "Who can be a member?". The second part is "How are members received?" The last part is "How do we prepare one for membership?"

I

Who can be a Member?

When we search the Holy Scriptures for the answer to our first question, "Who can be a member?", we come across God's directions and God's will. Our Lord said to his disciples, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature", (Mark 16:15). From this passage we see our Lord is concerned that his Gospel is carried to all, that each person has the opportunity to hear of God's Love and grace and to be brought into the "family of believers." In I Timothy 2:4, God tells us of his will—"who will have all men to be saved and come unto the Knowledge of the truth." Again in this passage our God would remind us that we should carry our message to, *all* because He wants *all* people to be saved.

God would make no exceptions. His mercy, his love is over all. He doesn't wish to see any lost ("I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Ezekiel 33 11). God wants his word carried to all; that all people, all nations, all the world might be his.

Our Lord shows us his concern for the Kingdom of Believers or his invisible church. He wants us, both pastor and layman, to be concerned about the invisible church also. We therefore should do the work that He has placed upon us, that souls might be added to that church.

We, however, work in the visible church. Because we cannot read the hearts of men we can only consider as unbelievers and as real mission prospects those who claim no membership in a Christian church, whether that church is heterodox or not. Therefore our mission work is among those who express an interest in our church and those who claim no church affiliation. Here, we might do well to hear a portion from *The Shepherd Under Christ* concerning prospects. "Prospects can come to a pastor's attention in various ways. In new areas canvassing is indicated. Where there is a nucleus or an organized congregation, leads to prospects can often be found in the congregation itself: an unchurched husband or wife; or unchurched parents of children on the cradle roll, in Christian Day School, the Sunday School, the Vacation, Bible

School. Premarital counseling where one party is not a church member presents opportunity. Members may tell the pastor of prospects. If the address of visitors who sign the guest register shows no church affiliation, that lead ought to be followed immediately. If they indicate a church affiliation, but in a church at some distance, a visit may still be in place. Care must, however, be taken not to become guilty of proselytizing, of violating an existing pastor-member relationship and with it the Tenth Commandment. The case of members of a non-Christian group is different—they are mission material. A pastor may also be led to prospects at social gatherings in connection with baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals. Here the ability to mingle with people is an asset.” (*The Shepherd Under Christ*, pg. 162, Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin S. Habeck, Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, Wis.)

Concerning the point, “who can be a member?”, God would have us see first of all that he wants all the world to be his; after all, He gave his Son out of love for that world, that whosoever believes in Him might have everlasting life, (John 3:16). God wants each pastor, each layman, each congregation to preach the Gospel, to share his Good News with all people.

But He would also have us realize, secondly, that we have a call to work with certain people in our community. We do not have the responsibility to tend to sheep under another pastor's care but the Holy Spirit has placed us over our own flocks and this is where our attention should lie. As the Apostle Paul spoke to the Elders of Ephesus, “take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the Church of God, which He hath purchased with his own blood, (Act 20:28).

Fully aware of God's directives to preach the Gospel, to do Evangelism in our community and in the world, we will carry out those responsibilities. We will present God's Law—his hatred of sin, and his Gospel—his willingness to forgive sin through the atonement of Jesus Christ, to the unchurched in our community.

After the unchurched hear God's message and are pricked in their hearts; they are often led by the Spirit to request more information. Now we become involved in a different type of work. We are now talking about an information class and further instructions which brings us to our second question, “How are members received?”

II

How are Members Received?

In discussing this portion of the paper, “How are members received?”, it is necessary that we realize we are now talking about visible members in a visible church or more specifically about receiving members into our own congregations.

We will begin first of all with the church and expressly those church members who are in fellowship with us or, who belonged to a sister congregation. The only way we have of receiving members from bodies or congregations that are in fellowship with us is through the means of transfer. A transfer is the formal way in which a member of a congregation in fellowship with us withdraws himself from the care of one congregation and its pastor, and places himself under the guidance of a different congregation and its pastor whose doctrine and practices are the same as that of the church he left.

We cannot receive a member who has been released from a congregation which is in fellowship with us, because that member by his release has been declared out of fellowship and doctrinal agreement with our sister congregation and cannot, therefore be in doctrinal agreement with us.

How about the unchurched? How do, we receive the unchurched into our congregations? The first means God has given us to, receive the unchurched is Baptism. Through the Sacrament of Baptism members are added to God's Kingdom and are likewise added to our congregations.

When we baptize little children, we are in a sense baptizing the unchurched. Although those little children are often, through their parents, members of our congregation. The act of Baptism is God's agreement, his covenant that these little ones *are* his children, heirs of eternal salvation; and therefore members of the visible church and of our congregations.

We also in the Lutheran Church have the right of confirmation for receiving members. We use confirmation as it was used in the early Christian Church. At that time they had an instruction of those people who were heathen or unchurched in order that they might become members. Young people and adults were instructed in God's Word (in his teachings, Matthew 28:20). Through that instruction and the later Baptism, these young people and adults were made children of God and members of the visible church. The instruction of adults preceded Baptism, as is the case today, in our congregations.

In the case of infants, Baptism came first and then the instructions. When the children reached their teens they were instructed so that they could understand the Baptismal Covenant made with God and declare their faith and acceptance of God's teachings. This is the practice we find today among the congregations of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. We call that day of affirmation, Confirmation Day. At the time of confirmation then, we declare once again that these young people are now members of our church and entitled to all the privileges, and entrusted with all the responsibilities that accompany membership.

As for the unchurched, those without a church, or those who belong to non-Christian organizations (Mormons, Jews, Jehovah Witnesses, Moslems etc.) they must be instructed before they can become members. So also is this true of those who belonged to Reformed, Calvinistic, or the Roman Church, they also must be instructed before they can become members in our congregations. It is even necessary today, to consider a thorough indoctrination of Lutheran people who were formerly in fellowship with us, in order to prepare them also for membership in our congregations and full understanding of God's doctrines. For they too come from a heterodox church.

Therefore we must have a program or a course designed to prepare all people to become members of our congregations. This brings us to part three of our paper, "How do we prepare one for membership?"

III

How do We Prepare One for Membership?

Before we get into part three, "How do we prepare one for membership?", let us pause here briefly and discuss the role of the layman in parts I, II, and III.

The layman is to be aware of his Lord's command to go and preach the Gospel to every creature. God has made him a missionary to carry the Message of Salvation to all people. The lay-man's responsibility is to preach the Gospel—to share the Good News with those who are in need. It means also that at times he approaches his pastor, and asks for aid and assistance in that very thing—in preaching the Gospel to all people.

The layman also has an important role in receiving members. He can assist in the instruction and education of the youth of his congregation, whether this be in the Sunday School program, in the Christian Day School programs or whether it be with young adults in the youth program.

The layman's role in the instruction of the young, in the instruction of members for God's Kingdom is very important. For the pastor is but one man and is often in need of the valuable assistance the layity can give.

Also we must realize that the layman has the ability to know the prospects of the community. The layman lives in the community and is generally aware of people who are without a church, who could benefit from the call of a person who is concerned with their spiritual welfare. This does not mean that the layman immediately runs to the pastor and tells the pastor here is a person that he should call upon. It means that the layman himself is also willing to make a call—to make perhaps the initial visit—to see what areas the pastor might be concerned about in his visit. Yes, the layman can keep his eyes open for prospects to add growth to his congregation.

The layman also plays an important role in preparing one for membership. Perhaps he is not learned enough in God's doctrines that he can teach the information class, but he can encourage, by speaking to the prospective member, by even accompanying him to class, witnessing to the fact, that this congregation will work for his spiritual welfare. And as much by his example of Christian living and Christian love make that person a member of the congregation as by the instruction of the pastor.

The layman has an important role in making, receiving, and instructing of new members for his or her congregation. But when we discuss this third part, "How do we prepare one for membership?", it is usually thought of as the role of the pastor to conduct an information class or a membership class. It is through this class that those who are unchurched or those who belonged to a heterodox church might be informed and educated in the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Since this instruction is among the duties of the pastor, it is also necessary to discuss, "How the pastor prepares one for membership!" Now, there are certain people who feel that that preparation depends upon who wants to be a member. Here we would like to ask ourselves three questions, each relating to the idea of varied preparation. (1) How should we prepare the unchurched? (2) How should we prepare the churched; those from a heterodox body? (3) How do we prepare one for membership who is from a church or church body with whom we formerly were in fellowship with?

The answer to question (1) is obvious—by instruction! The answer to question (2) is also obvious—by instruction! Again, the obvious answer to question (3) is through instruction! These instructions may vary, but none the less, there would be instructions for all. Some may wonder about this answer. They don't question instructions for the unchurched, nor do they question instructions for the heterodox churched. But they question the instructions of the third group—those people who were formerly members of a church body with whom we were in fellowship. What sort of instructions should we give, that person?

It is necessary, first of all, to determine the reason for which that person wishes to join our congregation. Has he come to us simply because we are the closest or perhaps the only Lutheran church in town—because of convenience? Or has he come to us because he is convinced that in his former church and former church body false doctrine is being taught and unscriptural practices are being tolerated? If this person is convinced of the false doctrine and agrees with our doctrines and practices in every part, then only brief instructions seem in order. None the less, during the regular instruction class he will have the opportunity to voice his faith which would indeed be valuable to the pastor and other people in the class. If, however, that

person has come to us out of convenience as is often the case, his instructions should be the same as the instructions for anyone else who comes to us from a heterodox body.

In order to encourage and aid each other in the instruction of new members let us here, take a look at the pastor's information class. How that class is composed, how that class is conducted depends largely upon the individual aptitude and scholarship of each pastor, although each class should have basic materials and basic instruction in mind.

Each class must be founded and grounded in God's Word. For God's Word is a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our paths (Psalm 119:105). God's Word is the very basis of our instruction. It is the only thing God has given us to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (II Timothy 3:15). Therefore, the foundation and core of all instructions is God's Word.

We also of the Lutheran Church are privileged to have another basic book for instruction, not because it is our "second light" but because it draws the "first" into a usable form for teaching the young. A form our early church fathers used with great success. We are thinking of *Luther's Small Catechism*.

That Catechism was written to assist and aid parents in the instruction of their children. Today the Catechism instruction, has been largely delegated to the church. It is a sad thing to note and yet it is a reality.

A pastor's information class must include the instruction from the catechism. Not because without it our members might lack something, but simply because that book becomes or has become a basis for much of the application in our sermon materials and in our discipline of one another. Therefore we will want to use this book in our information class.

Today, pastors might include or consider including in their information class the use of the publication of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *This We Believe* published in 1967. This book also in categorical form gives the teachings of our synod and it gives each member and each prospective member the opportunity to study black on white the teachings and rejections of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

One other book that, I feel, has value in general for an instruction class is John Mueller's book *My Church and Others*. Much of the information in the second part of the book is out dated. But the confessional position of part one contains material that can be well used in the pastor's information class.

These source materials are tools that will well equip any pastor to teach an information class. Each pastor, however, must decide which materials best suit his needs as he does his work of instructing the unchurched and those who come to him from different church bodies.

To list and review all the other materials that could possibly be used as instruction material for an information class is not possible. But to give you a list of some that have been used, with their strong points and weaknesses, will certainly be in line. Therefore, you have attached as a supplement to this paper a list of Bible courses that might serve you as a basis for an information class. While this list is supplied it is not meant to override or to overshadow the importance of the pastor having his own personal information course.

We certainly realize that the pastor is instrumental in leading people into the congregation, people who are not only members but people who are well informed who know the "mysteries" and the "full counsel" of God. Because he is instrumental in this work, the instruction class that the pastor teaches dare not be the verbatim reproduction of printed material whether it was printed in 1926, 1945, or 1975. The pastor must make his material and his information instructions his own. This will give him the ability to vary his class as his people

vary, applying to them the several truths of the Bible in his own language, his own words, in his own manner.

This point cannot be stressed too strongly. When a pastor is leading a discussion with new members, it is his manner—his way of presentation—that speaks as much of his love for his Savior as his content. It is important then that we make our information class our own. Use materials that are provided! But use them wisely, as wisely as you use a commentary in preparing a sermon!

The guidelines for receiving new members are the guidelines Jesus set down to his disciples when He sent them into all the world to preach the Gospel to all people, (teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you, Matthew 28:20). They are the guidelines Jesus gave to the seventy as He sent them out two by two (He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me. Luke 10:16). They are the guidelines which the apostles wrote to Timothy, Titus, and the congregations (Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and convince the gainsayers, Titus 1:9). When the pastor is aware of God's directives, of the peoples' needs, and of the Message he has to tell, he has all the guidelines he needs. Diligence in the study of God's Word, prayer, and trust in the Holy Spirit will provide the rest.

Supplement Materials

I. Bible History Method.

- A. "Schaefer Method"—Bible as textbook purpose: "to study about God's love for man"
1. Pro's: Shows how Jesus Christ is the unifying theme of Bible—discusses most major doctrines—Esp. good for examples of a Christian life—gets students acquainted with Scripture—trains them to think for themselves—stimulates discussion.
 2. Con's: Course is too long, lasts from mid October to the end of May—very demanding of the teacher—preparation time for the first years extensive—can easily spend too much time on minor points—it can lapse into a study of God without the Messianic emphasis.
- B. *The Wonderful Works of God* by P. E Eickmann
1. Pro's: It follows the chronological order of Scripture—Divided into twenty lessons, which means about twenty-one class periods—enables pastor to start more classes at different times—Gives students a handy review booklet—Three Appendixes in back—Appendix II incorporated in the lessons.
 2. Con's: Hard to get through one lesson in one hour—tends to make students dependent on booklet rather than Scripture—can be boring if pastor doesn't work through the material well enough—doesn't satisfy most pastors in regard to exhaustiveness
- C. No easy answer—Best is to work out your own.

II. Topical Method.

A. *What does the Bible Say?* by Oswald Riess

1. Procedure:
 - establishes Bible as source of all doctrine.
 - runs through doctrines of Bible, starting with most basic.
 - 24 lessons, with questions answered on basis of Bible passages, worksheet at end of each lesson.
2. Pros:
 - Bible stressed as source of all doctrine.
 - much packed into the 24 lessons.
 - instructor's manual gives excellent ideas and helps, illustrations.
 - directs student to Catechism to show teachings of Bible, are teachings of our Church.
3. Cons:
 - often misused by pastors, lends itself to minimum of preparation; questions, passages and answers can be read down the line without understanding.
 - home assignments somewhat unrealistic.
 - worksheet often too obvious, not enough practical, thought-provoking questions.
4. Evaluation:
 - When used properly by pastor who makes it his own, adding ideas, experience, bringing it up to date in historical parts, it can be excellent method.

B. *Basic Doctrines of the Bible* by Prof. Armin Schuetze

1. Description and Procedure
 - runs through doctrines in roughly same form as Riess, much more simply.
 - in form of readable pamphlet.
 - intended for teachers who have not gone through synod schools, to give them good basis in doctrine.

- but lends itself also to use as instruction manual for those who have once had instruction and have drifted away.
- not used as much as more common manuals (Riess, Eickmann)
- procedure for instruction use is not prescribed, so pastor would set up own.
- 16 chapters, with ideas for discussion, at end of each.

2. Pros:

- concise and readable for student's own use; in his language, not boring.
- pastor can work out own method using this manual.
- good, for 'ex-Lutherans'.

3. Cons.

- not written primarily to be instruction manual.
- for many pastors, not complete enough.
- may not be suitable for the unchurched as other manuals are, without a thorough overhaul by pastor.

4. Evaluation.

- Has possibilities as excellent manual, but only with excellent preparation by pastor.
- Would be a good take-home booklet for people in class, perhaps with pastor's own mimeoed notes added.

C. Catechism

Method one. Following Catechism exactly.

1. Procedure—Question by question,

- 15-20 questions per hour.
- About 20 hours of instruction to complete the course.

2. Pros

- Very thorough.
- Chance to use many Bible passages and thereby become familiar with the Bible.
- Become familiar with the Catechism.

3. Cons:

- Too many Bible passages can destroy the continuity.
- Course could become dull, not generating enthusiasm or questions.
- Could be of little profit and benefit for the teacher.

Method two. Catechism study adapted.

1. Procedure—Lectures based on outlines.

- Lessons based on questions with supplementary material from other sources.
- 20-22 hours to complete course.

2. Pros:

- Lively and more interesting.
- Easier to get people involved in discussion.
- Also thorough.
- Beneficial to all concerned.

3. Cons:

- Work involved.
- Time involved.