

Encouragement for the Discouraged Shepherd

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**Pastor Ron Koehler
Grace Ev. Lutheran Church of Southern Arizona**

Introduction

At a number of recent conferences and other gatherings, some of our brothers in the district—some of you—have opened up about difficulties in their ministries and things that caused them to be discouraged in their work as shepherds of God’s sheep. Some have also shared their struggles with clinical depression. Since it is often difficult to discuss those things, particularly in a large group setting, this has not gone unnoticed. Those of us who have never spoken up about things that discourage us certainly could have because none of us is immune from these things as we shepherd God’s people. We all experience frustrations and disappointments that can sometimes lead to a lack of enthusiasm for ministry. Since what has often been shared only privately among brothers has been brought more into the open, I was asked to share some words of encouragement for us all.

As I thought about this, I wondered what I could possibly tell you that you don’t already know. *God loves you! Jesus promises to be with you! The Lord has called you into ministry! Cheer up! This will all be over soon (well, relatively—at least “God soon”).* The right answers roll glibly off our tongues, but somehow, they aren’t enough to bring us out of our funk. There may not be much new to share with you, but it may very well be that we need to look closely again at what lies behind those superficial answers so that we can actually apply them to ourselves and find encouragement for ministry. The fact that so many of us continue to battle significant discouragement as we shepherd God’s people is an indication that it would be good for us to revisit some specific things that God did to encourage dispirited servants of his in the past and the promises that he makes to us as his children and as shepherds of his people.

So, maybe you’ll find something new here and maybe not. Maybe something God has to say will hit your heart in just the right way as you sit here needing it to. Maybe something will strike you a different way, as Scripture sometimes does. At any rate, I pray that you find it useful for yourself or maybe for a brother in need.

The Necessity of Talking about Discouragement

I wish I could simply state the fact that we get discouraged as we shepherd God’s people and go from there, but I think it best to share with you some of the things that are causing us to feel down, to wonder whether the work is worth it, to even consider whether we should continue serving.

Certainly, you can find plenty of articles out there that will spell out things that cause ministers to be discouraged. My preference was to ask for input from some of you and a number of other WELS pastors of various ages and experiences from around the country. I asked thirty-five pastors and one staff minister if they would share with me their thoughts on what causes them to be discouraged in ministry. They were also invited to tell me how they deal with this and to share what helps when those times come. The responses of the staff minister and twenty pastors were eye-opening. I am thankful to those of you who were kind enough to help me out, trusting me with your thoughts and your feelings. Your willingness to help all of us by doing so is greatly appreciated.

I have included a catalog of responses at the end of this paper for you to read through later, but would like to share a few items from it here. Naturally, they are not happy things.

“I actually said while teaching a Bible class that I had thought recently whether what I was doing made any difference. I didn’t mean to; it just came out during a back and forth discussion.”

“What’s the point anymore?”

“I feel like I am losing the battle of ministry to the world.”

“Emotional vampires—people who drain you of your emotion and energy but leave you barely alive so they can come back and suck more later.”

“Whatever discouragement I feel most often stems from the brothers and sisters in ministry. Laziness, selfishness, procrastination, lack of integrity, weak faith, outward hypocrisy, unwillingness to sacrifice, shoddy work, greediness, defensiveness, etc.”

“Satan plays on my guilt over sin and can be very convincing when he calls me a hypocrite.”

Conference is “a time for me to keep my head down and hope no one asks the dreaded question, ‘How are things going at your church?’ Couple that with all the innovative and new things other guys are doing and I just shrivel.”

“Maybe never having a day to get away, and if you do the text, email, or phone call was always on your mind. It’s not that you can’t physically get away—but emotionally I think the workings and ministry are always on your mind.”

“Numbers. Worship, BC, BIC, prospects, members—all of it. I stress about decline and viability.”

“The lowest moments for me are when I have displayed a double persona to my family—the private and the public. There have been a couple of occasions when I almost couldn’t make it out of the sacristy on a Sunday morning for that very reason.”

“Satan’s lie that ‘God isn’t good,’ as I view the world around me. Satan twists ‘the love of many will grow cold’ to ‘the love of God will grow cold’ and I start to believe it.”

**The discouraging things about members are so varied that it was too much to capture here with one quote. You can find them on the list at the end of the paper.*

Open. Raw. Honest. I don't know what I expected, but clearly not the depth of disappointment, discouragement, frustration, and pain that was shared. I felt a little ashamed that I didn't know some of this about friends, brothers. Then again, I don't share my frustrations and dejectedness with everyone either and certainly not the depth of those feelings. I should probably know myself better, but I can tell you, brothers, hearing the hurt brought me down. A lot. Feel free to ask my wife.

I don't think Empathy needs to be in your Top 5 strengths (CliftonStrengths), like it is for some of us, to hurt for your brothers once you know some of their specific hardships and the depth of their discouragement. It saddens me to know how much some of us are hurting regularly. It hurts to think that our own weaknesses are sometimes to blame. It hurts to think that most of the people that we serve have little idea about what causes us to be discouraged and how deep the hurt is—and that they may be responsible for some of it. It hurts to think that brothers who should understand and care more simply don't.

This is not supposed to be *More Discouragement for the Discouraged Shepherd*, so I'll get on with it. I want to be your Barnabas, but I'm certain that it is God who will be your Encourager today, just as he always has been. Scripture tells of a number of God's leaders, shepherds, servants, who were discouraged, and it shares with us how the Lord brought his love and encouragement to them. It is sure to help us find encouragement also.

A Lesson in Encouragement from the Life of Moses

Think of Moses, the reluctant leader. He wasn't feeling good about ministry, and he hadn't even started yet! You remember his exchange with God.

Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?

I'll go with you.

Who should I say is sending me?

I AM.

What if they don't believe me? What if they don't listen?

I'll give you some miracles to perform.

But I don't speak well.

I'll teach you what to say.

Please send someone else.

Aaron will help you. (Exodus 3-4)

This went far beyond his natural humility. Moses was weak and fearful in the face of his calling to shepherd God's people. God has called you, and you are already leading and serving his people, but some of you have told me that you identify with Moses' feelings. *No one is listening to me. I'm reluctant to step out into the battle again. I'm afraid of what's going to happen.*

As God gently persuaded Moses into service, he assured him that he would be with him. He would provide for him in the face of the daunting tasks ahead of him. The Lord needed the job done, and he decided that Moses was the best one to do it—despite his fear and weakness and lack of confidence.

You see the parallels for us, don't you? The Lord is also *your* encourager as you go about the work he has called you to. Jesus promises that you are not alone as you serve: "Therefore go and gather disciples from all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to keep all the instructions I have given you. And surely *I am with you always* until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20 EHV). I am with you, Jesus says. Can't we also trust the Holy Spirit, who lives in us, to guide us in our service and our speech? This promise comes from Jesus too: "When they bring you before synagogues, rulers, and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourself, or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you should say" (Luke 12:11-12).

If you haven't been feeling that God is with you as you serve, think back to when you were absolutely certain, and you went about your ministry tasks with conviction and faith that this is true. Read again Scripture's accounts of the life and leadership of Moses, and you'll find that God made good on his promises to be with him and to help him and to give him people to stand by his side as he served. Take to heart Peter's encouragement: "Shepherd God's flock that is among you, serving as overseers, not grudgingly but *willingly*, as God desires (1 Peter 5:2a)." Like with Moses, the Lord has work he needs to have done for the salvation of souls and the guiding of his sheep. Be encouraged that he has decided that you are the one to do it and that he is with you!

A Lesson in Encouragement from the Life of Elijah

When we think of discouraged servants of God who found encouragement from the Lord, don't we naturally think of the dejected prophet Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-18)? He was discouraged by some of the same things you and I are—things that some of you specifically told me: people who have turned away from God's grace, people who aren't interested in worshiping God but gladly worship worldly things, people who have disrespected the men who bring them the Word. These things bring us low and may make us also want to run away, lie down under a broom tree, and ask God to take us now!

God didn't do that with Elijah, and he is unlikely to do that with you. What do you remember God doing for his dejected prophet? You remember the angel he sent to serve as his waiter. You remember a long journey and a night in a cave. You remember the Lord's gentle approach. "Why are you here, Elijah?" You certainly remember Elijah's answer: "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of Armies, but the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your

altars and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking to take my life” (1 Kings 19:10). You remember the loud and dramatic display of wind, earthquake, and fire—and that the Lord was not in them.

And then you think back and you hear with Elijah the gentle whisper. The Lord gently whispers to you in your time of need or uncertainty or fear or sadness too. “Why are you here?” Yes, why have you come to this place? Why have you come to feel the way you do? God has given you Mt. Carmel-like victories and assurances, but you have forgotten them. Or, as you face difficulty and opposition, you don’t have faith in God to continue the winning streak.

So here you are. You are at this low point because ministry is hard. A few handfuls of sad surveys reveal part of the problem. We have sin-weakened minds that don’t process things well. So, we believe the lie that it is all up to us, or that we are faithful but our members are not, or that we are carrying the weight of ministry alone, or that the battle can’t be won, or that the best thing to do is just quit (unless you can convince the Lord to just take you to heaven now). Ministry is hard because the people we serve are sinful too. So, the counseling is hard. Having to continually go back to help people for the same thing again and again because, as one of you said, they keep returning to their vomit, is hard. It’s hard because sometimes the words just don’t come easily as you try to write a decent sermon (or conference paper). It’s hard in so many ways. That’s why we’re here at this low place.

Where do we find the encouraging whisper of God when we are discouraged even to the point of just wanting to be done? We ought to remember how God worked with Elijah. That ought to be encouraging. If remembering Elijah just isn’t enough, is there more? Of course there’s more.

It’s in the words of his prophet of long ago calling out to us today, “Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be overwhelmed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. Yes, I will help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10).

We find it in the confirmation passage that we give to a young confirmand: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified and do not be overwhelmed, because the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).

There it is, written first with a pen held by Paul’s hand, telling us that God is able “to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20).

We routinely place these gems of comfort into the hands and hearts of those we serve. They clutch them as they leave the counseling session. They hold onto them as they walk out of worship. They circle them on the Bible study handout that they then tuck it into their purse to take home. We pray that they will pull those passages out every time they need them. Then they will know when they are down and hurting that God is not only there, but that he loves them and takes care of them. Then their spirit will be calmed and comforted. They will be encouraged and strengthened to go on.

Brothers, are we only handing these words out like a doctor hands out a prescription for a condition their patient has but he doesn't? We believe that God will work through his Word to comfort and encourage his people. He will do that for their shepherds if we will revisit those promises for ourselves.

A Lesson in Encouragement from the Life John the Baptist

Who can possibly understand the doubt and confusion of John the Baptist as he sat in prison for teaching God's will (Matthew 11:2-15)? Prior to this, John had clearly and without question pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). He had endured a tough way of living and taught a tough message of repentance (Mark 1:1-8). He was faithful in preaching and teaching and baptizing and pointing people to the Savior who forgives repentant sinners. (Does this sound familiar?) But there he sat, suffering for simply saying what God said (Matthew 14:3-4). He had preached repentance, but like some before him, Herod did not repent. John could have made the case before God that he and Herod were each on the wrong sides of the prison wall.

In the midst of this, John sent friends to Jesus because he needed to know, "Are you the Coming One or should we wait for someone else" (Matthew 11:3)? There he was, a faithful servant of God, sitting and wondering about his efforts and whether he was really right. Jesus himself would encourage him! The Lamb of God assured John that the prophecies about the Messiah were fulfilled in him and by him, even as John sat in a cell.

Certainly, we can't feel things in just the way that John did, but doubt, dejection, confusion about ministry? That we get. Jesus tells us to go and gather disciples by teaching and baptizing. *I'm trying! It's not happening—for sure not the way I want. I can't find people for an instruction class. I haven't done a baptism since I don't know when. I'm sharing the Word, but the people aren't changing their ways. I know how this is all supposed to work! I do, don't I?*

Where is Jesus when you need him to help you in the way that he helped John? In that moment when your Savior feels far away, and you're not sure about why things are going the way they are, he sends you truths that will embolden you to continue. He reassures you that he is indeed this world's one and only Savior—you have nothing to worry about there. You can listen to the same words that he sent to John and know that he is the Savior who was to come. You can recall him saying this too: "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father, except through me" (John 14:6). He reminds you that it is the Spirit through the Word who does the work on souls. "My word...will not return to me empty. Rather, it will accomplish whatever I please, and it will succeed in the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).

The Lord intends to calm our troubled hearts and lift us up with these promises and more like them. You can trust that he simply calls us to be faithful in pointing people to him. We are not charged with being "successful." We might be blessed to see amazing results as we labor, and the Holy Spirit works on hearts. John saw many repent and be baptized. Then again, though it is hard to accept, we may

find that our faithful work meets opposition and rejection, as John also found. Discouraging times make this difficult, but I suspect that your ministry is a combination of both, if you care to see it.

As John's disciples left to report to him in prison, didn't Jesus praise John and his work to the people gathered around him—the very work that landed John in prison? Faithful work, yet Pharisees and experts in the law rejected John's baptism (Luke 7:29-30). Herod certainly did not respond well to his instruction (Matthew 14:3-4). John's suffering continued, but not for long (Matthew 14:10). No doubt, our suffering will continue to some degree, but our conviction is strengthened when Christ assures us that he is indeed the one that people need and the one we've been called to point people to. Doubt and confusion and frustration are tempered when we listen again to the reassuring promise that the Holy Spirit is working through us no matter what tangible results we see or don't see.

A Lesson in Encouragement from the Life of Peter

Even if everyone else leaves you, I won't!

You're going to deny me three times tonight.

I'll die before I deny you!

You were with Jesus!

I don't know what you're talking about.

This is one of them.

No, I'm not.

You are. You're a Galilean!

I don't know him. (Mark 14)

It's painful to read and hear. We know it's coming, and it's still awful. He's so sure, so certain. His words smack of pride and self-reliance. He's one of three who can't stay awake as Jesus tries to lean on them for support in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46). He's the one Jesus called "Satan" once (Matthew 16:21-23). But this last thing, the denying of his Savior, had to be the most devastating one. He had to remember well Jesus looking into his eyes after his denials. After Jesus was killed on a cross and he and the others went into hiding, can you imagine Peter's intense guilt and feelings of unworthiness (Matthew 26:75)?

It's hard not to notice that after his resurrection, Jesus reinstated his broken disciple by asking him three times if he loved him (John 21:15-19). Peter definitely got the opportunity to consider his feelings toward Jesus each time he was asked. Did he think of his failings as Jesus looked at him now not with the look of the suffering Savior saying, "I know you better than you know yourself," but as the risen and forgiving Lord looking at a broken disciple.

*Do you love me?
Do you love me?
Do you love me?*

With humility, the heartfelt confirmations come.

*Yes, Lord.
Yes, Lord. You know I do.
Lord, you know everything. You know I do.*

Three times he denied him. Three times he was embraced by him.

We are broken too. We feel it more at some times than others, but sin affects our relationship with Jesus and affects our serving him. It can come in the form of pride and self-confidence. It can come in the spontaneous reaction of fear. Each of us knows the very personal ways we have offended our Savior. We feel broken because we are. But the grace of Jesus is for us too. We are also forgiven for our weakness because Jesus passed through the courtyard and courtrooms and then on to the cross. He went there for Peter. He went there for you. He went there for me. He was broken in order to heal our brokenness. When we know our sin and feel our shame, the resurrected and victorious Savior looks at us with a forgiving look. We say that we love him, and he knows that we do. His forgiveness comforts us, and we listen when he says to us as he did to Peter,

*Feed my lambs.
Be a shepherd for my sheep.
Feed my sheep. (John 21)*

The story of Peter encourages us because it tells us that with Jesus' forgiveness and his gentle nudge, we can recover. That low point is not where we need to stay. Jesus picked Peter up and set him back to work. Peter did serve as a shepherd who fed Jesus' sheep. He's still doing it too through his words written on the pages of Scripture and etched in people's minds. More than being inspired by Peter's response, we are inspired by the Good Shepherd—the one who healed his broken disciple and continued to use him as his under-shepherd. He does the same for you and me.

Encouragement from the Good Shepherd

The Creator has made you and made you his. He loves you deeply. He called you into his family. He called you into ministry as a shepherd for his sheep. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He knows what it is like to shepherd sheep in this world. He dealt with everything we do and more—the sinful behaviors of those he served, the opposition, the rejection, the frustrations. The irritations of everyday ministry he experienced were not less than those we experience. The pressure of Gethsemane's battle was not less than the pressure we face. The suffering of Calvary and the laying down of his life for the sheep was not less than the suffering we endure. He knows. He knows that you fight stress and temptation and discouragement. He's been there, and he's here to help you. He knows you can't do it on your own. You need him.

The promise of Jesus to be with us at all times bears repeating. The encouragement to spend time with Jesus in his Word that we give to others needs to be heeded by us. Open the gospels to learn from the ministry of Jesus. What did he do with sinners? He spoke of sin and grace. What did he do when people didn't understand? He kept teaching. What did he do when people opposed him even to the very end? He kept trying with them. Again. Again. Again. He is the Good Shepherd who was constantly helping and leading his sheep. He calls you to the work of shepherding, and you can always learn more from looking back at how he did that.

Think about how Jesus spent time in prayer at stressful times (Matthew 26:38-39,42-44; 27:46; Luke 23:34,46; John 12:27-28), and remember the precious privilege that we have to pour out our hearts to God. Unloading what is sometimes an enormous bag of burdens before him brings some relief because we know that he understands. What a blessing that is when it seems no one else does. When we are discouraged and even desperate, not even knowing how to express ourselves or what to pray for, we are comforted to know that the Holy Spirit speaks to the Father for us. What an invitation our Lord gives us: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

If it is encouragement and peace we're looking for, these are the things God calls us to remember and do. Even the shepherd of God's people can forget. Even we can be so consumed with our concerns and striving for our own solutions that the thought of settling in to read and consider the ministry of the Good Shepherd may not occur to us. Time may not be spent in fervent prayer. In moments of self-absorption and self-pity, it may not come to mind that Jesus Christ, the risen Savior of the world, is Lord of the Church that he holds together as each of us does our part (Ephesians 4:7-16). I encourage you to do these things so that Jesus may encourage you.

Encouragement in the End Times

We have recalled that God's servants have always experienced difficulties and dealt with discouragements that come with ministry. And now, as the signs of the End continue to be observed and experienced, the conditions for discouragement are getting worse. Certainly, sin is increasing as the Last Day grows closer. Jesus said it would. Days of great distress like nothing the world has ever seen precede the Day of Judgment, he says. How bad will it get? "If those days were not shortened, nobody would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, those days will be shortened" (Matthew 24:21-22).

Don't let the bad news of increasingly difficult times that threaten to discourage you overshadow the good news of the salvation that is near! Jesus is returning soon, and "He will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other" (Matthew 24:31)." You are preparing for this yourself, and you get to prepare the elect for this! What a privilege this is even when the work is difficult! And how pleasing it is to God!

Final Encouragements

Few understand this work like we do, brothers. The band of shepherds called by God to care for his sheep is a small fraternity. God is pleased when we shepherd and encourage each other because no one quite knows how to do that for us like we do for each other. He even gives us an example in Scripture to show us how we might do that. We don't have his words to hear how he did it, but we have his actions that tell us what he did. Barnabas trusted and encouraged Paul after his conversion when many did not. He encouraged the other disciples in Jerusalem to accept Paul as a fellow worker in God's kingdom (Acts 9:26-28). Barnabas mentored his cousin John Mark, whom Paul once distrusted enough to not take on a mission trip (Acts 20:36-40), but whom he found useful later on (2 Timothy 4:11). Encouraging, defending, supporting, guiding his fellow gospel workers—this was the work of the Son of Encouragement (Acts 4:36). This is our work too.

Please know that I have been praying for you, brothers. I will continue to do that, and I ask that you do that for me. Lift up one another with an encouraging word, a listening ear, an understanding heart, a heartfelt prayer.

As you shepherd the Lord's sheep and support one another, may these promises of God encourage you and give you hope as you anticipate the Day of Salvation:

“Blessed is the man who endures a trial patiently, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God promised to those who love him” (James 1:12).

“And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive an unfading crown of glory” (1 Peter 5:4).

Offered to the Glory of God

DISCOURAGEMENTS SHARED BY FELLOW SHEPHERDS

**Numbers in the left column are the number of people with the same response.*

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Fatigue – lack of sleep and lack of quality time off

The isolation of a single pastor ministry

Stress in my own personal relationships

Paying too much attention to media

Things are difficult at home, either as husband or father. It's difficult to minister to others when you are reminded of your own failings in the vocations of the home.

(Speaking of a major health issue and medications) Right now, as I type, my fingers don't always want to go to the correct key because my first dose of the morning hasn't quite kicked in yet. [Likely, I will be typing on and off this morning and finish it another day.] I'm also discouraged while visiting a member and my focus/speech/movement affects my ability to communicate. I'm often told that they don't recognize the difficulty and that frustrates me even more, especially when it's a family member. How do I deal with these moments?

2 Struggle with Depression I can't seem to shake the negative thoughts.

SELF

I believe the lie that it is all up to me.

I always wonder what others will think/comparisons with other pastors/churches (incl. synod report comparisons)

Double persona to family (lowest moments)--the public and the private (lose patience on Sat--smiley preacher on Sunday)

Dwelling on the End Time problems we see around us.

Self-pity when we see all the problems in our church and the world

I actually said while teaching a Bible class that I had thought recently whether what I was doing made any difference. I didn't mean to; it just came out during a back and forth discussion.

What's the point anymore?

The greatest discouragement of all is me. I know the signs of the end. I know what Jesus said. I know what he has done. I know what he has promised. ...I have a sinful, pathetic way of showing it.

Depending on the day and the issue, it's self-righteousness and self-pity that I fight the most--arrogantly angry or depressingly frustrated.

When I thought I prepared well for that sermon or Bible class but fall flat, humanly speaking, and wonder out loud why the Lord chose me to serve His people.

I feel like I am losing the battle of ministry to the world.

2 Balancing time for family, church, self. I forget I have a wife who needs time.

2 I wake up at night and think about what to say, or what someone said, or how to reach someone.

I let my congregation down by not spending enough time on Bible study and worship prep or with them. I feel the same when it comes to family--miss things, never around. The kicker--I don't manage my time well.

I feel like I'm carrying the weight of the ministry alone. But I'm also a terrible equipper.

No pastors to talk to or lean on in the circuit or district. I haven't put effort into making friends.

Law passages sometimes stand out and stick with me more than Gospel passages. "You're a fraud." "You're fake." "You're not good enough for God."

2 I try to please people rather than God. Need for approval from others.

I want life to be easy.

What am I doing wrong that has led to church decline or this or that not going well?

Never enough time or energy to get to all assigned or expected of me

Sometimes I have an overwhelming feeling of unworthiness. I know that is the truth and usually I am deeply moved by God's grace, but sometimes it leads to guilt instead.

Even though I'm working hard, I can't get to it all. Some things I say I want to do or I am going to do end up taking forever to get to.

CHURCH MEMBERS

5 Members who don't show up/worship or volunteer

3 Apathy toward Means of Grace, Bible Study / Don't read Bibles, know Bible stories

3 Members love the world, aren't worried about sin, but are worried about appearances.

Christians have lost their mission focus/role as witnesses, outreach mindset--consumers on Sunday morning

Christian parenting

People not responding to your efforts (phone, email). Including members, inactives, prospects

Members leave after I made a huge investment in them.

- Leaders who don't worship or go to Bible class regularly
- Congregation not seeing big picture/overemphasize or underemphasize portions of ministry
- 3 Members falling away, many of whom we have confirmed
 - Active members who move away
 - Members who make up excuses to leave the church
- 2 Chronic problems in members lives. Watching "us return to our vomit again and again."
 - Members who are angry and impolite when I am clear about what God says on a number of subjects
- 3 Members complaining about/fighting with/not getting along with each other
 - Emotional vampires - people who drain you of your emotion and energy but leave you barely alive so they can come back and suck more later.
- 2 No one takes responsibility for any actions. I am wrong; they are right.
 - Members continually bringing up the past, not acknowledging a changing church and community
 - Members' politics disrupting the unity of the congregation
 - Younger people disconnected from participation in the church they grew up in
 - Delegated tasks go forgotten or unfinished

FELLOW SHEPHERDS

Whatever discouragement I feel most often stems from the brothers and sisters in ministry. Laziness, selfishness, procrastination, lack of integrity, weak faith, outward hypocrisy, unwillingness to sacrifice, shoddy work, greediness, defensiveness, etc.

Discouragement and frustration with the pastoral ministry in the WELS and battles with other pastors from vicar year until today (*a pastor with decades of experience*).

With WELS leaders who aren't "Lutheran" and their loyalty to WELS instead of the Confessions.

Brothers talking as if a successful ministry is up to the pastor, as if that is all that it takes (not discounting different gifts or unfaithfulness to the Call)

Brothers suggesting that if a congregation isn't healthy, the pastor isn't working hard or is unfaithful. If there isn't numerical growth, isn't it something if God blesses the preaching and provides people to replace those who move, leave, or die? Isn't this maybe also a mark of faithful ministry?

Brothers don't really get together. Guys don't go to conferences. They are "busy" and have other priorities.

SATAN & THE WORLD

Satan is good at trying to deflate pastors by putting the focus on what WE have to do to make a ministry successful.

Satan has new names for old sin and you see it in the news

College influence on young people--sexuality, ignore the truth and trade it for a lie

Satan plays on my guilt over sin and can be very convincing when he calls me a hypocrite.

OTHER

Poor community event turnout

Long stretches without baptism or BIC

No one in Catechism despite a school

Called workers focused on self or their clique.

Outreach events that don't bear fruit

Conference is "a time for me to keep my head down and hope no one asks the dreaded question, 'How are things going at *your church*?' Couple that with all the innovative and new things other guys are doing and I just shrivel."

A bunch of things add up

The church's financial picture

Maybe never having a day to get away and if you do the text, email, or phone call was always on your mind. It's not that you can't physically get away - but emotionally I think the workings and ministry are always on your mind.

Liberal churches allow immoral lifestyles. It hampers work with prospects.

Too many meetings, conferences, district, circuit meetings, assigned papers. I think we ask too much of pastors outside of their own ministries.

I think what makes for a good mission pastor is the guy who is going to send out one more invite or stop to visit one more prospect. But it's hard to do that without being hopeful. And it's hard to have your hope end in disappointment so often.

Don't know Sem profs or what is being taught at the Sem; it is hard to trust--adding new courses, core courses are different, no books anymore, laptops--maybe good, maybe not.

Numbers. Worship, BC, BIC, prospects, members--all of it. I stress about decline and viability.

END TIMES

2

Who of us isn't discouraged by wars and rumors of war, by earthquakes and famines (and fires and floods), by a growing disregard and hate toward Christianity, Christians, and the church, by apostasy, by the love of most that has grown cold?

LGBTQ Agenda, Wokeism, Gender Issues

How much more ungodly the world seems to be getting. (Because of the increase of wickedness my heart is growing cold.)

Satan's lie that "God isn't good," as I view the world around me. Satan twists "the love of many will grow cold" to "the love of God will grow cold" and I start to believe it.

As society moves farther away from God's Word, the mission efforts of the church are not getting easier

THINGS THAT HELP WHEN DISCOURAGED SHARED BY FELLOW SHEPHERDS

**Numbers in the left column are the number of people with the same response.*

WORD

- 5 Teach the Word vigorously
Be in the Word vigorously; Habit of daily meditation, Bible reading, memorizing Scripture

When I dwell on the cross, instead of everything else, that's where I find peace and forgiveness, exactly what I need to move forward.

Psalm 62:5-8

Hebrews 4:14-16

Remember God's mercies new every day; his forgiveness is for me too.

Psalm 42-43

Psalm 112

WORSHIP

I find prayers and hymns written decades, even centuries ago, comforting and encouraging as they often remind me that "nothing is new under the sun" and as we live in these end times, to trust in God's plan to bless me and my members despite me.

Confession and Absolution

PRAYER

Pray

Pray, asking the Lord to give me more wisdom and insight to better be prepared in difficult moments

PEOPLE/ASK FOR HELP

From leaders

- 3 From brothers in ministry

From circuit pastor

From presidium

My wife is (mostly) a strong, optimistic, child of God; while I don't share any day to day ministry details with her, her personal support and concern for me is most helpful.

A "father confessor" layman from a previous congregation.

Godly men around me has been vital to personal growth. This includes fun times with them.

The brothers at circuit/conference/district meetings

MINISTRY

There are no silver bullets to take the place of regular, faithful work.

Sunday worship is almost always very uplifting for me. It's not easy, but always rewarding.

When worship attendance is low, I feel better by being more proactive in my contact to people.

Remember the "little flock" you serve, the faithful people/ remember that many disciples turned back from following Jesus (John 6:66)

MEMBERS

I laugh at the moments when members thank me for a particular sermon or Bible study knowing I had just said to myself, "well, that didn't go as well as planned." God has a sense of humor I suppose.

Members who take advantage of Means of Grace, volunteer, give, encourage other members

Members who volunteer

Don't take words, actions, inactions personally

When I look at our members, I see so much good! Gifted, willing, supportive. (Our asst. literally handed me a card while I was writing this and feeling troubled by all of the pain and frustration felt by me and other pastors. Part of it said, "Thank you for making a difference. You can be sure all you do is noticed by God and appreciated by us.")

OTHER

2

I stay away from national, political, and social media buzz. / I have to turn off the news.

IVA = Identify (what the issue is and what emotions I am feeling), Validate (the issue I am facing is painful, it hurts, living in a sinful world suck), Align (what is a specific verse or section of the Bible I can look at where someone faced the same thing?)

Remind myself that not every frustration I have is spiritual (I am spiritual, physical, emotional, rational also)

4 Rest, food, time with wife and kids.

Books on the subject I'm dealing with.

Hobbies are a good thing.

Take time off

A DMB member reached out when a mission request couldn't be funded at that time and to check in on family.

A pastor from a church where one of my winter visitors belongs reached out to tell me about the impact I had made on them and their appreciation for their ministry. A 5-minute text of encouragement or appreciation from a brother can be invaluable and maybe just what is needed that day.

Habits of good nutrition, adequate sleep, exercise

Date night with wife, family dinners when possible

Proper medications to deal with depression

Take it one day at a time

All of this has happened before; it is expected (Disciples, Elijah, JB) IF WE WEREN'T DISCOURAGED, WE PROBABLY AREN'T DOING OUR JOB! IF SATAN IS NOT WORKING ON US, THEN WE AREN'T CONCERNED ABOUT THE WORLD'S CONDITION

When I see how God blesses his church despite the challenges.