

# Getting to Know Your New Congregation

---



---

Written for use by participants in the Post-Seminary Applied Learning and Support (PALS) program. Updated 2014.

Post-Seminary Applied Learning and Support (PALS) is a collaborative effort of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's Pastoral Education department and LCMS districts to help pastors and their wives in the transition from seminary to congregation. To learn more, visit [www.lcms.org/pals](http://www.lcms.org/pals).

Made possible by a grant from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
Pastoral Education  
Copyright©2014



# Getting to Know Your New Congregation

---

## Contents

About This Manual	4
Getting to Know Your New Congregation	5
Conclusion	11
Bibliography and Resources	12
Appendix 1: Concerning Visitation	13
Appendix 2: Where Do I Start?	15

## About This Manual

*(“Getting to Know Your New Congregation” is a guide originally developed by the LCMS Commission on Ministerial Growth and Support, which ceased operation as a result of restructuring mandated by the 2010 LCMS convention. A number of revisions and updates have been made by PALS Coordinator, Carrie O’Donnell, in response to feedback received by the PALS office.)*

Many years of research and observation have shown that there are certain pieces of information that are helpful when a pastor enters into a new congregational ministry as a recent seminary graduate. Recognize that these study materials are intended to be an *effective supplement* — not a *replacement* — to family visits and good listening.

It is tempting to not spend the time necessary to gain insight and understanding into the history and life of a congregation. There may be a desire to get started with some emphasis on moving things forward. The inadequacies in your new church may seem obvious, and so may the

solutions. A funeral or two may interrupt the schedule, as might the couple that was waiting to get married until the new pastor arrived. Boards and committees may be seeking advice and direction. Sermons need to be written, and depending on the time of the church year, plans need to be made for Advent or Lenten services. All of these “needs” militate against spending time discerning the journey the congregation has been on since before receiving its new shepherd. As powerful as these forces may be, it can never be overstated that getting to know the congregation is still one of the best “first actions” a pastor can take when he begins his ministry in the congregation.

*Before you can know where you need to go, it helps to know where you’ve been.*

We pray that you find these materials helpful, and we wish you God’s blessings as you begin your ministry.



# Getting to Know Your New Congregation

## Getting Started

When a pastor is assigned to his first parish, there are many activities involved in the transition. Besides personal needs like finding a bank, a grocery store or a doctor, there are many pastoral and professional activities as well. The first regular weekly sermon needs to be written. The order of service needs to be determined and hymns chosen and then communicated to the organist. The process for printing the bulletin needs to be learned, along with all of the other details that come with the weekly responsibilities of running a church. If the pastor is married with children, he also may have concerns related to schools for his children, child care or employment for his wife. It may seem that there are more decisions to be made than there is time to make them.

Members of the congregation will be interested in the new pastor (and his family) and will seek his advice and counsel on many matters. However, while they may be seeking guidance and assistance from him, it also is important that he receives some information from them.

Research conducted on new ministry starts has shown that the first 12 months of a pastor's ministry at a new congregation are vitally significant in the relationship between that pastor and the congregation. How the pastor enters, how he starts and what he sets in motion in these early months are crucial. It is, therefore, essential to focus on this question: *What is important for me to know so that I can begin this ministry in the best way possible?*

The answers to this question come from a variety of sources. Obviously, the years of theological growth and formation in the seminary provide a significant amount of information, as do the pastor's own life experiences. By the time the

pastor enters ministry in his first parish, he likely has experienced many different forms of employment, been a member of and served in a number of different congregations, and has one or more college degrees along with a Master of Divinity. These experiences are invaluable as they provide a wealth of resources for pastoral ministry.

## Same Lord, Same Gifts, Yet Unique Setting

Ministry takes place in a local setting, and this setting has its own unique defining characteristics. The community may have one ethnic background, be ethnically diverse or be in transition from one culture to being bi- or multicultural. The congregation may be located in a region of the country that has identifying values, customs and mores that distinguish it from other regions. Certain businesses or industries may drive the local economy, with the life of the community integrally connected into the life of this economic driver. The climate may help determine local recreational activities. The community's proximity to other cities may help define it. The area may be growing or declining, rural, urban, suburban or transitioning from one to another.

The church may have been around for more than 150 years, or it may be a recent mission start. The congregation may be embracing a demographically changing community, or it may be trying to hold on to the past and resistant to the change that is taking place. The congregation may be comprised mainly of lifelong Lutherans, or it may be made up of a significant number of people new to the Christian faith.

*Though the same pastor could be placed in each of these ministry settings, the initial actions that pastor would take in each situation would be as significantly influenced by the setting as by what the pastor brings to the setting.* Ministry is always in context and in relationship with the people of that context. Just as Jesus and Paul took into consideration the people and local customs when

carrying out their ministries, so will the parish pastor today. Therefore, it is very important for the pastor to understand as well as possible the context or milieu of the ministry into which God has placed him.

### **Is There a Honeymoon?**

Although it has often been said that the first months for a pastor in a new parish are a “honeymoon” period, many anecdotal stories and some research indicate that it is really a period of testing. Depending on the circumstances that led to the last pastor’s departure and the amount of time the pastoral office in the congregation had been vacant, the congregation may be very joyful that they now have a pastor. There may be great willingness to make some changes and try some new things as they transition into new pastoral leadership. There may be renewed excitement in the congregation, and some members who had dropped away in the absence of a full-time pastor may return.

While these actions are taking place at one level, at another level the new pastor is under a great amount of scrutiny even from the very beginning. Though the parishioners may be warm, friendly and tolerant of the new pastor (and his family), they also are evaluating his performance in many areas of ministry. They are continually comparing the new pastor with the strengths, weaknesses and idiosyncrasies of all previous pastors. Assessment is being made of his performance based on the informal and tacit rules and rituals that have become the values of the congregation.

*Don’t let this assessment and scrutiny overly concern you.* It’s a normal part of the process of developing trust in a person with whom they will eventually share their greatest joys and deepest sorrows.

The testing period may appear to be a honeymoon, as people want to assist the new pastor in getting started. When there are mistakes made or things that are done without the most complete forethought, people may say, “Give him a chance. He’s just getting started.” Or “He

is younger (older) than (last pastor), so he does things differently.” Words or behavior might seem to dismiss actions of the pastor that are too different or unacceptable to them, but some people in the congregation may be mentally keeping record of these “happenings” and may bring them to his attention later in a time of crisis or conflict.

*Therefore, a new pastor should not assume that there is a honeymoon or start-up period where he can do anything he wants as if it will not make any difference in the long run.* To help avoid making this mistake, the new pastor needs to become aware of what is going on in the congregation now and what has gone on in the past. A key to getting off to a good start for the long term is to gain a deeper understanding of that congregation.

### **Set the Expectation**

As LCMS President Rev. Dr. Matthew Harrison said in his remarks following his election in 2010, “I wish to inform you that you have kept your perfect record of electing sinners as president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. I guarantee you that I will sin and fail. I will fall short. I will sin against you. ... I beg of you your daily prayers and intercessions. I promise you that I will be as straight with you as I possibly can to the best of my ability and guided by the Spirit of God. ... I will do my best by the Word of Christ to lead with the generous Gospel of Jesus Christ, which forgives us all of our sins and motivates us to love and care for our neighbor in mercy and compassion.”

Let your people know up front that you will make mistakes. You will sin against them. And ask that when — not if — this happens, they come to you first. Stress the need for all members of this body of Christ to confess when we sin against one another and then freely forgive one another just as we, too, have been forgiven.

## History Is Important

When a pastor begins his ministry in an established congregation, that pastor is entering a group of people who have been on a journey. If he can understand that journey and some of the significant people and events that have contributed to it, he will have an important key to a positive start. Consequently, there is a need for the new pastor to be a historian.

Generally, people want to talk about other members and former pastors who have served that congregation. The questions to be asked are: *Why do people want to tell me this information and what is important about it to them? What is the message? Are they telling me something about what they want from me?*

Every parishioner has an emotional relationship with the congregation, and they have emotional relationships with their pastors. When they share information about their previous pastors, they are giving the new pastor glimpses into what they liked or disliked about previous pastors and what they will probably like or dislike about their new pastor. That they liked a previous pastor's short sermons may indicate that they will expect the new pastor to preach short sermons. That they thought a previous pastor should have made more home visits may indicate that they hope the new pastor will make many home visits. It is, therefore, helpful to know the history of the congregation and the present perceptions of the previous pastors in that history. This knowledge will, hopefully, create empathy and understanding of the pastor for and with his people.

## What About the Eighth Commandment?

*So how do you help protect your members from breaking the Eighth Commandment?* Preface your conversations with members with a statement such as: "Before we go any further, I'd like us to keep the Eighth Commandment in mind and try to put everything under the best construction." When members start to talk about the aspects of their previous pastor that they didn't like, redirect the conversation and ask them what they'd like to

see done in the future rather than what they feel was done wrong in the past.

Do be careful about allowing members to speak poorly about your predecessor(s). Wives, this goes for you too! Allowing them to do so now tells them that it's OK to do so later. But then it will be about you...

*And what about the beloved previous pastor?*

Sometimes it's hard to hear your members gush about how wonderful the previous pastor or his wife and family were and how much they love and miss them. Actually, it's not a bad thing to hear these sorts of positive comments. It probably means that they like and have respect for the person who previously held the pastoral office in their church. It bodes well for you, since you may enjoy that same kind of love and respect with time.

## Each History Is Unique

Every congregation has a history. It has a personality. Each is unique. A congregation may have nuances similar to other congregations, but its persona is different. The way a congregation began laid the groundwork for how the congregation developed.

For example, the congregation may have started as a decision of the district's mission board to plant a new church in that area because of present and future projected growth. It may have been a break-off group from another congregation, or it may have been a "daughter" congregation as part of a mission outreach of a "mother" congregation. Each of these beginnings has a different influence on the present functioning of the congregation.

## Key Individuals

Along with the uniqueness of its beginning, a congregation also has a number of highs and lows that have defined it up to the present time. Leaders helped shape, mold and form that history. Major events may have happened or not happened because of one or more significant individuals. Who were these leaders? Were they clergy? Were they laity? How did they influence the church?

Examples of key individuals could be: 1) the founding pastor, 2) the previous pastor, 3) any previous pastor who was there for either a long time or who helped the congregation through a difficult time, or 4) a layperson who was instrumental in the “success” of the congregation through significant financial support or dedicated and committed leadership (e.g., the matriarch who always made sure all of the details for running the church were covered). Hopefully, you wouldn’t speak unfavorably of them, but to not know who they are or to not honor them at significant times in the life of the church could be an unnecessary stumbling block to ministry. Although this would not necessarily fatally damage your ministry, why not avoid potential difficulties if you can?

### **Previous Pastors and Wives**

Like it or not, previous pastors and wives helped shape your members’ expectations and influence the way your people will, at least initially, relate with you. *This isn’t all bad.* Your predecessors may have set the stage very nicely for you. Because of a positive experience with those in the past, your members may expect to like, trust and respect you.

But what about the previous pastor who may have left under a bit of a cloud? What if your predecessor damaged their trust? Love your people. Show them love and patience, as they may take a little longer to put their trust in you. You may find that it takes a full year — sometimes more — before people really start opening up and revealing those things that make them most vulnerable.

There is a temptation when you hear about mistakes made by previous pastors and wives to think that you have the answers to everything, you would never have made the same mistakes and you will be better than those in the past. Remember, however, to take everything told to you with a grain of salt. It was probably not as good, or as bad, as they remember.

### **We Have Histories Too**

Since most of us grew up as a member of a congregation, we have a sense of what a church and a pastor or pastor’s wife “should be like.” We each carry images (positive or negative) of these churches, pastors and wives. When beginning ministry in a new congregation, these images from the past will encounter the new church and its definition of itself and what it has liked and not liked about previous pastors and wives. Understanding this dynamic, and the history of the church into which the pastor is now called, can help reduce the potential of future conflict.

### **Congregational History in Light of Their Pastors**

Congregations tend to divide their history by pastors. For example, “We built the new sanctuary when Pastor Brown was here.” “We added on to the church when Pastor Schultz was here.” “We bought the expensive new pipe organ when Pastor Werner was here.” “The day school was closed when Pastor Evanson first became pastor.” Attitudes toward these events will provide insight into the congregation’s attitudes toward these pastors, which will, in turn, provide insight into their attitudes and potential behavior toward the new pastor if he suggests similar or opposing changes.

Another example: their beloved previous pastor, whom they absolutely trusted, eliminated weekly Communion. For the past several years, the church has had Communion every other week. Though you might like to go back to weekly Communion immediately, you may need to build some trust with the members and do a little education on the “why” behind weekly Communion before making that change.



## **What Has Worked in the Past? What Has Not?**

New pastors also should be curious about past “successes” and “failures.” An exploration of the church history will discover many of these. If there was something done well in the congregation in the past, this activity should be affirmed and supported. For example, if they have conducted a vacation Bible school that was considered successful in the past, then its importance to the congregation should be understood.

If, however, the congregation tried something in the recent past that did not do well in their eyes (e.g., spending a lot of money on a mass mailing to the community advertising a church event with little to no response), there will be a certain “raw” feeling about what happened. The importance of this to the congregation should also be understood. Knowing key successes and failures is important information for the new pastor.

Though a sensitive pastor is continually “testing the waters” and “taking the pulse” of the congregation to gain information about all of the concerns addressed above, an intentional action to collect this information can be helpful. The following lays out some suggestions on how this might be done.

## **A History Gathering/Reflecting Process**

The purpose of this historical gathering and reflecting is to help the new pastor become aware of the journey the parish has been on since its inception. It helps discover special strengths and liabilities. It can help the new pastor understand the forces in the congregation’s history and the perceptions of congregational members so that he can more completely and empathically respond. This understanding does not mean that a pastor will change shape and form. But it does mean that a pastor will be more deeply aware of congregational strengths and struggles, energies and pitfalls in the life of this group of God’s people. *This knowledge may not ultimately change what he does, but it may change how he does it.*

Gathering the congregation’s history allows the new pastor to be aware of certain pressing needs, sensitivities and priorities in his ministry that may not be immediately obvious otherwise.

## **How Should You Gather the History?**

*The best way to get to know your people is to visit them — regularly — in their homes and in the community.* Visit them in their homes, spend time with them at community events, invite small groups or families to your home. Gather smaller groups for potlucks, coffee and other events to get to know one another better. Hold a number of “fireside chats” for your members to get to know you better. As you open yourself to them, you will find them opening up in return.

## **Who Should Be Involved?**

Some groups to consider gathering for the purpose of getting to know one another and for perspective on the congregation’s history include: current leadership (including board chairs and congregational officers), board of elders, trustees, LWML, youth, church staff, school faculty (if there is a church school), the choir and musicians, Sunday school teachers and so on. This is a great opportunity for your wife to get to know these members as well. And don’t forget to include your shut-ins in this history gathering process! They are often longtime members who bring a whole new perspective.

*Reminder:* Whether you meet with members individually or in small groups, remember to preface your discussions with the desire to keep the Eighth Commandment and to put the best construction on everything. If your congregation has recently gone through significant struggles, it may be best to have these discussions with individuals or with very small groups, letting them know that your intention is not to open old wounds but to get a better understanding of your congregation’s past to provide a framework for moving forward. Inviting an open discussion that includes past problems in a large group could result in a very unpleasant session during which blame is assigned and feelings are hurt.

## Recording the History

It makes sense to put together a timeline of the church's history. Much of this may already be recorded somewhere for you, but it's helpful to talk through some of these key events with your members. Some things to include in your history timeline are:

1. The names of previous pastors and when they served.
2. The most important events that took place during each of the pastorates. (You can include important secular events as well to help put everything in perspective, such as the Great Depression, WWII, 9/11 and so on.)
3. Building programs (or relocations).
4. Significant changes to the church's ministry offerings (such as adding or deleting a worship service or initiating a significant new ministry project).
5. Significant milestones (e.g., the burning of the mortgage).
6. Major changes in the community (e.g., a factory opening or closing, a new highway bypass that diverts traffic, a new school — all can have a major effect on your congregation) and even natural disasters (e.g., the tornado that devastated the town).

It is interesting to see what your members recollect as the most important events during the time of each pastorate. And though you may not have any members who were alive at the time of your church's inception, they may have stories that have been passed down from relatives or former members. You can certainly gather much of this information from written records and archival photographs, but the stories and emotions that are tied to these events will often be more significant to you than the events themselves.

You may find that those events that stand out and the stories that surround them are different for each group, each family or even each individual. *Much of the congregational history (and the emotions attached) is very personal.* Blood, sweat and tears have been poured into this church over the years. The events, the highs and lows have affected them very personally. Countless hours may have been spent on a building project, and tears shed over a family member leaving the congregation. Listen. Though time-consuming, it's time well spent.

## What Does This Mean?

Once you have some historical framework, you can begin interpreting what this means for your congregation moving forward.

What does our history mean? What does it say about us? What is important? What is not important? What have been our priorities? Where have we been weak or strong?

What you learn may be as simple as: "Since we have potluck meals before every Advent and Lenten service and before every major event, food and fellowship must be important to us." It may be revealing: "We have had significant turnover in our parochial school teaching staff these past few years. Something is going on there that we don't yet understand."

After you've asked for the significant events and have developed an historical timeline/framework, you can ask your members to help identify the congregation's strengths and struggles. And finally, what could you, as the new pastor, learn from all of this?

## Conclusion

This activity is intended to assist you, the new pastor, in learning more about the congregation you are called to shepherd. The information gained is considered descriptive of the past and not necessarily proscriptive of the future. Histories reflect the propensities and values of the congregation's previous journey, but they do not dictate its future. That story is yet to be written.

Your ministry there is just beginning. Not all significant information about the church can be gained in one evening. This is a process, and one that takes time.

Since you are asking people for this information, take it seriously. Use it for your own understanding and for future planning.

Finally, gathering this information in groups is not intended to replace home visits, phone calls, casual conversations and other intentional actions to learn more about the people, church and community in which you shepherd and lead the people of God.

## Bibliography and Resources

Upon arriving in your new district, you may have received a demographic profile of your community from the Lutheran Church Extension Fund (LCEF). If not, contact your district's LCEF vice-president or visit [http://lcef.org/ministry\\_planning/#demographics](http://lcef.org/ministry_planning/#demographics) for more information. This is a great resource for you and your congregation.

Wives struggling with the move may want to read:

- › *After the Boxes Are Unpacked* by Susan Miller (Tyndale, 1998). *More than 40 million Americans move each year, and studies show it can be one of the heaviest strains on a marriage. For women especially, relocating can be a traumatic event. With true stories, ingenious insights and helpful hints, this great book makes transitioning smoother so women can get on with their lives. Those who are moving will find this valuable book as important as packing tape.*
  - › This author has written a similar book for children who are unhappy about moving titled *But Mom, I Don't Want to Move!*
- › Culbertson, Philip Leroy, and Arthur Bradford Shippee. *The Pastor: Readings from the Patristic Period*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.
  - › Harbaugh, Gary L. *Beyond the Boundary: Meeting the Challenge of the First Years of Ministry*. Washington, D.C. (4125 Nebraska Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20016): Alban Institute, 1998.
  - › Knippa, William B. *Transition from Seminary to Parish*. (DVD and study guide from the PALS program)
  - › Oswald, Roy M. *Crossing the Boundary: Between Seminary and Parish*. Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1993.
  - › Oswald, Roy M. *New Beginnings: A Pastorate Startup Workbook*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2014.
  - › Phillips, William Bud. *Pastoral Transitions: From Endings to New Beginnings*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1994.

The following books were used as resources in the original edition of this PALS course. Some are rather outdated but are still available in print. Others have been updated recently. Many of these were published by the Alban Institute. Although the institute closed as a separate entity in the spring of 2014, work is continuing under the Alban name through the Duke Divinity School.

- › Callahan, Kennon L. *A New Beginning for Pastors and Congregations: Building an Excellent Match upon Your Shared Strengths*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.
- › Clayton, Paul C. *Letters to Lee: Mentoring the New Minister*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999.

## Appendix 1: Concerning Visitation

by the Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison

### **“A home going pastor makes a church going people.”**

Those words of Dr. Robert Preus at the Fort Wayne seminary stuck with me. Before I began serving in my first parish, I had also stumbled across the section in Dr. Walther’s *Pastoral Theology*, where he instructs pastors about the importance of and how to visit the homes of parishioners. Combined with good effort at preaching, there is simply nothing so significant in the pastor-people relationship and the well-being of the congregation as visitation.

Visitation is a much more profound reality for the Church than we realize. Just follow Jesus’ movement through the Gospel of Mark. “Let’s go!” He told His disciples (Mark 1:38). Jesus is the quintessential peripatetic. The “Great Commission” gives every pastor and the whole church its mission. It’s no mistake that Matt. 28:19 is the first verse in the ordination rite. “Go, therefore!” After the Jerusalem Council sorted things out regarding the Gentile/circumcision question, Paul turned to Barnabas and said, “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are” (Acts 15:36). What is not evident in an English Bible is that the Greek word in the original for “visit” is the verb form of the word Paul uses for overseer — that is, episcopus or bishop. “Therefore an overseer [episcopus] must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2).

Someone once quipped, “The problem with you Lutherans is not that you don’t have any bishops. The problem is you have too many!” They were referring to the teaching of the New Testament and of our Lutheran Confessions that every local pastor is an overseer or bishop. What’s his authority? Only the Word of God. And the chief word Paul uses to describe the pastor’s office is the very word for visit! A pastor is a visitor. He admonishes, rebukes on occasion, consoles, encourages and comforts God’s people — all with the Word of God — and he does it while wearing out his shoes, speaking the Gospel to those along the way who have not heard it.

Out of freedom, the Early Church followed the example of Jesus, Paul and the apostles in ordering the church. At the time of the Reformation, when most of the Catholic bishops did not become Lutheran, Luther and company began ordering the church for its benefit too. (See *Luther’s Works*, vol. 40, p. 269.) From the beginning, the Lutherans called most of their bishops “superintendents,” and the LCMS calls its leaders “presidents” (e.g., district president, Synod president).

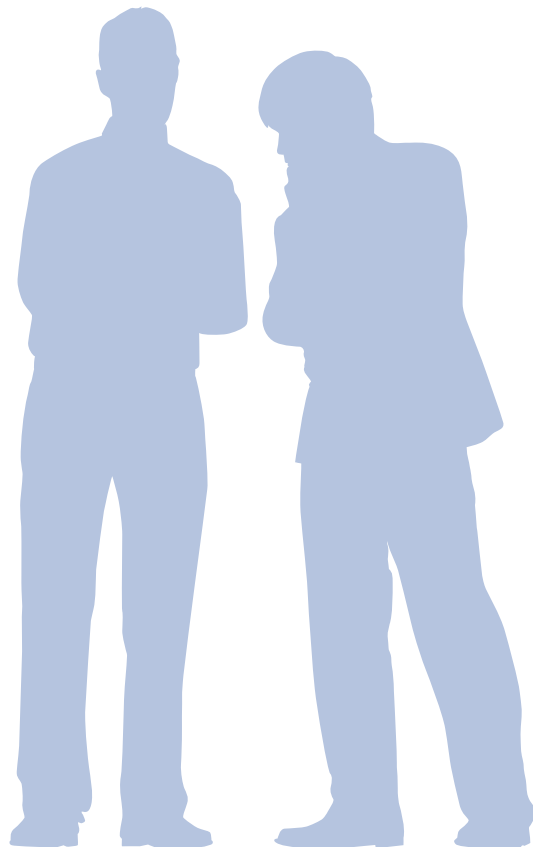
The constitution and bylaws of the LCMS are heavily weighted toward visitation, a function of ecclesiastical oversight or supervision. That is a fundamental task of the Office of the Ministry. Our presidents are in the office, and they carry out the functions of the office as a ministry of service, which extends no further than the Word of God. In this, the district presidents are defined as an extension of the Synod president’s office. The president of Synod is to visit the districts, the universities and the seminaries and has general ecclesiastical supervision to see that the doctrine and practice of the Synod is adhered to and that convention decisions are carried out. “Doctrine and life!” (Luther). District presidents are to visit the congregations and pastors. To get

this done, they are to use their vice-presidents and especially circuit counselors. We should return to calling these men “circuit visitors.”<sup>1</sup> One sees a “counselor” when there is a problem, but visitation is to be a regular form of pastoral encouragement toward fidelity and mission, accountability, admonition, comfort and care. Just check out Paul’s letters to figure out what it’s all about. He went. He sent letters. He sent co-workers. As he visited established churches, he constantly preached and planted new ones.

Pastor Matthew Harrison  
“Let’s go!” (Mark 1:38)

Email: [president@lcms.org](mailto:president@lcms.org)  
Web page: [www.lcms.org/president](http://www.lcms.org/president)

<http://blogs.lcms.org/2012/concerning-visitation-9-2012>



<sup>1</sup> Update: In 2014, LCMS congregations ratified the 2013 LCMS convention’s approval to amend Article XII of the Synod Constitution by changing the term “circuit counselor” to “circuit visitor.”

## Appendix 2: Where Do I Start?

*by the Rev. Dr. Herb Mueller*

### Advice to pastors new in a parish, but applicable for all.

1. Begin in the Word of God. Begin on your knees. Nothing is more important for you or for me as we go about our work than to be in the Word of God faithfully and to be at prayer for yourself and for your people.
2. Make the very next priority the ongoing (never-ending) development of a positive relationship with your board of elders. Communicate with God together (be in the Word and in prayer together every meeting); communicate with each other; communicate with one voice to the people.
3. Visit, visit, visit. Get to know your people as soon as possible. Let them know you care about them and their ideas and needs. Then listen, listen, listen. Keep on visiting.
4. Start the visitation with your officers and elders. Give them a chance to tell their story and give you a sense of the history. Where have they been? Where are they going? Keep on listening.
5. Use the information you gain to write a history of the congregation for your future reference. Who is connected to whom? What are some of the significant events of the past 5-10 years? What are the “historical pitfalls”? Respect that history.
6. Always be concerned to develop positive relationships with people. The days when people will automatically give a pastor their full trust are gone. Trust grows from love and mutual accountability.
7. Yes, most of the people in our district do trust the Office of Pastor as Christ’s Office, but it will take some time for them to develop trust in you personally as the present occupant of that office. Be steady, faithful, consistent, care for them, and the trust will come.
8. Be sure you are working for Christ to build His Kingdom rather than you building the “kingdom of you.”
9. The area of service in which people most quickly learn to trust a new pastor is in his visitation of the sick and those who are hurting in some way. If word gets out that you are slow in responding to needs, that’s very hard to overcome. Congregations will overlook other foibles if you are faithful in visitation, but if you are weak in visitation, other problems are easily magnified. On the other hand, if people see you respond quickly and faithfully to the needs of the sick and shut-ins (these are “golden opportunities”), trust will come more quickly in other areas as well.
10. Love each and every one. Give yourself to them. Live with them. Suffer with them. Grow with them. Be interested in their interests. Even if someone is disagreeable, go to them and care for them anyway.
11. Faithfully teach — over and over again. Faithfully and lovingly teach and always, no matter what else you do, point them to Jesus.
12. The best way to develop a trusting and caring relationship with your elders? Be accountable to them. You are the servant of Christ and servant of the people — not for them to order around, but you are to serve them with the Lord’s gifts. It is best for you that you report to them how you carry out your responsibilities — not confidential details — but be accountable for what you are doing.

- 13.** When you discover problems, and you will, don't approach them alone, but always with the help of your elders and officers. Be sure you fully understand the situation. If they don't understand what the problem is, teach lovingly from the Word of God. Make changes together on the basis of that Word.
- 14.** Before you make changes, even necessary changes (be sure it really is necessary), walk with people so that you understand their needs and their feelings. After all, Jesus Himself came to walk with us before He went and did anything else for our salvation.
- 15.** The best advice I ever received from my vicarage bishop (Al Bahr, Eastern District acting president, 1976-1978): You can get a lot done if you personally do not have to receive the credit for the idea. If they do something because they think you want them to, most of the time it won't last. On the other hand, if the idea comes from them (from their growing understanding of the Word of God and their situation), then it becomes theirs (even if it was your idea, your teaching from the Word all along) and has a much better chance of lasting.
- 16.** Preach faithfully. Plan your preaching. Constantly point to Jesus, clearly, in a manner that speaks to their needs. You can do no better than to make 1 Cor. 2:2 your motto in preaching: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."
- 17.** Remember, none of us is perfect. None of us can stand before the Lord except by His full and free forgiveness. The cross of Christ is for preachers too! Preachers need justification by faith in Christ as well. Make use with a fellow pastor of the gift of private absolution.
- 18.** First, last and always, take care of your family and their needs. Ministry often involves a balancing act between pastoral work and family. But remember, God made you a husband and father before He made you a pastor. That will always be your primary vocation. You cannot be a good pastor unless you are first a good husband and father.









1333 S. Kirkwood Road  
St. Louis, MO 63122-7295  
888-THE LCMS (843-5267)  
*infocenter@lcms.org*  
*www.lcms.org*