

Building a Long-Term Ministry



by Rev. Dr. Gary W. Zieroth

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 lcms.org/pals.

Made possible by a grant from
Thrivent Financial for Lutherans.

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Pastoral Education
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Introduction

One of the reasons PALS was started in the LCMS was that some men didn't stay very long in their first call. There was often a larger than normal turnover of men in their first three years of ministry. The question became: Is this good for the church at-large or not?

The Alban Institute set out to research the effect of long-term pastorates on congregations and pastors. They found six main advantages to what is termed "long-tenured" pastorates (definitions will come later). The researchers verified the possibility of healthy, growing, long-tenured pastorates for both clergy and congregation. The six advantages identified were:

- › A long-tenured pastorate makes possible greater in-depth knowledge of and relationships between the pastor and individual church members as well as between clergy and the congregation as a whole;
- › Experiencing a long-tenured pastorate makes it possible to develop cumulative knowledge and experience of each other for both clergy and congregation, as they observe and participate in each other's growth over time;
- › Greater continuity and stability of leadership and program in a long-tenured pastorate make events possible that are not possible during a short tenure;
- › A long-tenured pastorate opens up possibilities of greater personal and spiritual growth for both clergy and congregation;
- › A long-tenured pastorate makes possible deeper knowledge of and participation by the clergy in the community (local, professional, appropriate ecumenical, and within the district and Synod); and
- › A long-tenured pastorate allows additional personal benefits for both the clergy and his family.¹

¹ Ludwig, Glenn E. *In It for the Long Haul: Building Effective Long-Term Pastorates*. The Alban Institute, Bethesda, MD, 2002, pp. 15-16.

In the end, the bottom line of it all is really the one advantage that outlasts, outweighs and outshines all the disadvantages — long-term pastorates tend to lead to healthier congregations.

Discussion Questions:

1. Review the six points mentioned above. Talk about each one in your own context or from the experience of others.

2. What are some signs of healthy congregations? Talk about the following and add your own to the list:

- a. Developing a teaching ministry in Word and Sacrament
- b. A sense of mission
- c. Growth in stewardship over the years
- d. Active participation by its members
- e. A sense that things are "moving forward"
- f. _____
- g. _____
- h. _____

For Further Study and Discussion:

- › faithandleadership.com/dave-odom-measuring-ministry-impact-takes-years
- › faithandleadership.com/seven-year-itc

Session One: Doctrine of the Call

Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession teaches that “no one should teach or preach publically in the church or administer the Sacraments without a regular call.” You have been qualified for the Gospel ministry in the LCMS, and so, in good conscience, you are given charge by God Himself through the congregation to render service that is acceptable to God and will be blessed by Him in a particular place. That is, in order for you to have a good conscience in this matter, you must be certain that you have a divine call — along with your training and certification by the church, it is this call that makes you a pastor and preacher. In Is. 6:8, the Lord asks the question “Who will go for us?” Isaiah answers, “Here I am! Send me.” In *Pastoral Theology*, John Fritz speaks of serving in a call in “good conscience”:

Such a case is entirely different from that in which one seeks a certain call to a call to a certain place and is prompted to do so by the desires of his flesh (money, social advantages, family ties, comparatively easy work, etc.). He, however, who volunteers for certain work in the Church, although he knows that he will have to endure many hardships, leave home and friends, and have little or nothing to gain as far as this world is concerned, and does so unselfishly and purely out of sincere and ardent love for his poor fellow sinners and out of love to his Lord, can do so with a good conscience and should not be censured, but praised. Such, however, as Luther remarks, are rare birds. It is self-evident that, whenever a minister knows that he is out of place because he cannot give satisfactory service in bilingual congregations, or because of conditions of health, and the like, he may with a good conscience ask for a change of pastorate. A pastor in charge of a congregation should keep in mind that the Lord has called him to that charge and that he should therefore not for any selfish reasons seek to get away.²

² Fritz, John H.C. *Pastoral Theology*. Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, 2000, p. 44.

Since we do not believe in a “temporary call,” we believe that it is God who calls His pastors to the congregation (Acts 13:2–3) until He chooses to call the man out of that congregation or place of service. Fritz states, “The ‘temporary’ call would conflict with the pastor’s continued faithfulness and steadfastness which God asks of His servants in the ministry, 1 Pet. 5:1–4; 1 Tim. 4:16; 1 Cor. 4:1ff. Finally, the temporary call is contrary to the practice of the Apostles, who were not to determine how long they should work and remain with the congregation, Luke 9:4–5.”³

It may be God’s will that He call you away from your present charge, in His timing. Fritz would call it a sinful thing for a pastor not to remain in a call or accept a new call if he is convinced that God is calling him. He states:

God well knew that Jeremiah was young and inexperienced, and yet he said to him: ‘Say not I am a child; for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces; for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord,’ Jeremiah 1:7–8. God well knew that Moses was not eloquent, and yet He called him to be the leader of Israel. God well knew that Saul was unworthy and insufficient for great work in the Church, and yet he singled him out to be the great Apostle to the Gentiles. If one has made sure that God is calling, he dare not let his own unwillingness and the feeling of his own sufficiency stand in the way lest he provoke God’s displeasure. Yet, as Luther remarks, ‘if one doubts that God has called him to do a certain work, he had better not undertake to do it, for he would not accomplish anything anyway.’⁴

Since it is God who has called a man to be a pastor of a certain flock that He has entrusted to his care (Acts 20:28), a pastor should not leave his congregation unless he is convinced that it is God who is calling him to a new pastoral charge (Jer. 23:21). Therefore, as Fritz summarizes, “the pastor should wait until a call comes to him and should not of his own accord cast about for a call, especially not if he intends to do so merely

³ Ibid, p. 46.

⁴ Ibid, p. 47.

to get a larger salary, 1 Cor. 9:14–19; 1 Thess. 2:9, to find more pleasant surroundings and easier work, or to please relatives and friends, Gal. 1:15–16, or because he believes that his gifts and ability entitle him to more important, difficult, and responsible work in the Church. If a pastor is well qualified for greater work in the Church, the Lord knows his address. Also, a pastor should not leave a congregation because of any evil-minded persons in his church who are embittering his life, Rom. 12:21.”⁵

St. Paul would say: “For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. . . . I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them” (1 Cor. 9:16–17, 19). It therefore remains, and seems reasonable to believe, that if a man has been chosen by God for the ministry, he should not without a good reason forsake that calling, especially not in view of the fact that “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Matt. 9:37).⁶

Basically, Luther would summarize the above thoughts by saying, “If you are to preach His Word, He will no doubt call on you to do so at His own time. Do not determine the time limit or the place for Him.”⁷

In summary, it would seem that we wait upon the call of the Lord in all circumstances until He is ready to move us into another area of ministry. It would also seem that we, as pastors, would do well to plan our ministries for the long haul, understanding that the Lord of the Church is in charge, blessing the Gospel where we serve in often difficult circumstances.

The faithfulness required of a pastor covers many areas. We are first to remain faithful to the Lord, His Word and His people. There is faithfulness in the stewardship of physical

resources, in the management of time, to be alert to the possibilities of service where God has planted us. There is faithfulness to add to our store of knowledge by means of private and joint study. Finally, there is the faithfulness, under the care and provision of our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, to do the best work of which we are capable. Yes, under God’s grace and mercy, we are in it for the long haul. Now take some time for further discussion.

Discussion Questions

1. In discussing serving in a call in “good conscience” (i.e., knowing God has given you a valid and legitimate call), Fritz alludes to the fact that some may seek a call that is prompted by the “desires of the flesh” or for “sinful” reasons. Talk about some reasons he mentioned:

- a. Money
- b. Social advantages
- c. Family ties
- d. Easier work
- e. Other reasons?
- f. _____
- g. _____
- h. _____

2. If a man accepts a call for any of the above reasons, will it invalidate his call? What about serving with a “good conscience”?

⁵ Ibid, p. 59.

⁶ Ibid, p. 63.

⁷ *What Luther Says*. Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, 1959, Vol. II, No. 1950.

3. Besides Jeremiah, Moses or Paul, can you think of other men in the Scriptures who reluctantly accepted God's call but remained steadfast? Any from church history? Anyone you know personally who remained in a call despite extreme circumstances and/or difficulties?

5. Are there any valid reasons that a pastor may want to "seek to get away"? (This should only be touched upon, as this will be discussed more fully later.)

4. From the perspective of the congregation, what would you think their desire would be in relation to length of service for their pastor? Why?

Session Two: The First Few Critical Years

It can no longer be assumed today that there is a “honeymoon” period in the ministry. It seems that people in North American pastorates have become more realistic, if not more skeptical, of those in authority. It seems that people today expect those in authority to earn the respect and trust of those they serve.

That said, Glenn Ludwig (and others) compares the pastor/congregation relationship to a marriage. Much like a marriage, there are similar comparisons to newlyweds and to a pastor’s initial relationship with his congregation. First, there is the “getting to know you” part. Here, pastor and people are getting to know each other, and this can take some time. Second, there is a time of idealism. He married a beautiful queen; she married a charming prince. The congregation might feel that they have called the “perfect” pastor, and the pastor feels that this is the “perfect” place for him. It is a wonderful feeling, but not realistic. Soon the sins and imperfections of the other become apparent, which can be discouraging. Third, a honeymoon period can be exciting. Everything is new and fresh. All human encounters are new and ripe with possibilities. There is no history to repeat, forgive or overcome. The future is open, adventurous and exciting. It is a wonderful place to be!

However, the honeymoon “myth” can lead to two very different approaches for pastors as they get to know their people. In the book *In It for the Long Haul*, Ludwig says one approach believes that because pastor and people are “in love,” the pastor should make all the changes he can during this period. If the pastor is the ideal person they have called, the pastor assumes permission to make these changes, believing that the congregation will embrace whatever it is. The second approach is just the opposite — to make few, if any, changes during this “honeymoon” period. Ludwig says:

The working philosophy behind this approach advocates that we should not use up all our pastoral currency during the initial stages of ministry; we may need some for later. This approach calls for a period of listening and learning about the parish and its people ... a pastor needs to develop relationships so that future decisions can be made in a spirit of dialogue and mutuality. It is important to ‘pay your dues’ so to speak — get to know the people, offer faithful service, and build upon relationships so that ministry can flourish collegially rather than by pastoral fiat.⁸

Then comes the first crisis or test. Was there a death or accident, a fight between groups or individuals in the church, a budget crisis? How a new pastor handles any one or all of them will be keenly noticed. There are two ways to handle crisis. You can respond or react. Reacting is an immediate action. It usually doesn’t require any thought. It is quick, automatic and decisive. On the other hand, responding is a thoughtful and deliberate action. In responding, we measure our words before they come out of our mouth. As we mature, we learn to monitor ourselves in healthy ways — to keep from saying or doing things that we will later regret. The list of potential crises can be lengthy. How will the pastor be perceived in the midst of such crisis? Will it be as a thoughtful, deliberate, calming presence? By responding appropriately to each crisis, the pastor goes a long way toward developing relationships based on trust and respect.

It is also important that the pastor acts with integrity. Integrity has to do with character, trustworthiness and maturity. A pastor who is planning a long-term pastorate will want to follow through on his promises. Keep his word. Honor confidentiality. Does the pastor take time to listen to people? Can the pastor admit when he is wrong? Without soundness of character, a pastor’s credibility is seriously threatened. A pastor who lacks integrity will not have the emotional or psychological maturity to survive over the long haul. When lack of integrity is

⁸ Ludwig, p. 20.

exposed, any trust that had been developed between a pastor and a congregation can be seriously threatened. And if trust does not exist, the opportunities for future ministry will be limited.⁹

Spend time getting to know the people — the history of the congregation. Listen to their stories, concerns and joys. Keep these early goals in front of you and assess your ministry on a weekly basis. Listening to other staff, leaders and members early on will help you discern and clarify your goals. Remember to begin each meeting with a good amount of time devoted to the study of God’s Word and prayer.

Lastly, it is important to develop mutual accountability at the beginning of any ministry. This means that staff and leadership of the church deliberately take responsibility for their areas of ministry — to share openly what is happening in those areas, to seek advice and counsel from one another, to support one another and to hold one another responsible. When mutual responsibility is practiced, there will begin to be formed a growing awareness that (a) ministry includes all the people in the church — not just those who are paid, and that (b) pastors can value, appreciate and welcome the counsel and service of those who are a part of our fellowship.

Whether you find that you have had a time of honeymoon at your church or a time of trial, or somewhere in the middle, getting off on the right foot is extremely important. The central issue in any relationship is the development of trust between persons involved. This is a vital topic that needs to be discussed in our next session. For now, discuss these issues together.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you experienced a “honeymoon” in your present situation? If so, what did it look like? How long did it last? What were the factors that brought it to an end?

2. If authority today needs to be “earned” and “respected,” what would that mean for the pastoral office?

3. What kind of changes should be made in the first year or two of a start-up ministry? What sort of changes should not be made?

4. What was your first “crisis” or “test” in the ministry? How do you think you handled it?

⁹ Ibid, p. 24.

5. Do you have a plan for visitation in your parish every year? Do your goals need to be revised?

7. Describe some of the various settings in your congregation where you could get to know people.

6. Write out some realistic goals for visiting your people in your congregation:

The first six months:

The first year:

The second year:

The third year:

8. Share some ideas about opening meetings. Is there enough time devoted to study and prayer? A time for caring conversations? A time to listen for concerns and joys? A time to laugh together? Some congregations have a simple meal together before meetings as an opportunity to talk and listen. Would this be practical in your setting?

Session Three: Developing Trust and Building Foundations

In John 10, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.” The sheep know the shepherd’s voice. A stranger’s voice they will not follow. The shepherd cares for the sheep, and they know it! The pastor’s role is to have his people listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, Jesus. He will faithfully proclaim Law and Gospel in his teaching and preaching ministry. He will help to bind wounds, heal diseases and keep the flock away from anything that threatens them. The pastor, as undershepherd, also sets out to know and care for these sheep. In turn, the sheep will develop a trust for their pastor as a faithful shepherd. They have learned over the years that he will help provide food and water and a place to rest. Trust is developed. Once trust is built, teaching is more focused and effective.

Today in America, the average pastorate lasts about five years.¹⁰ Experience suggests that, in a good pastoral setting and relationship, a five-year pastorate should be at its prime. Many congregational call committees speak of and hope for a new pastorate lasting at least 10 years or more. One book suggests that seven years in any parish becomes a break point.¹¹ Why seven years? There is a consensus among clergy that something happens in a pastorate between five and seven years of service. In this time, there is a change in the relationship between pastor and people. The trust that has taken time to develop has laid the groundwork for growth, depth and change to arise from a foundation of respect and love. Simply put, it takes about seven years, give or take, for the pastor’s teaching ministry, priorities and leadership to begin to take effect. In a matter of speaking, he has “paid his dues.”

The beginning of a ministry is like paying dues to an organization. People expect something of

their new pastor — good sermons, friendliness, availability, caring, to name a few. As we pay these dues, a trust fund of trust is developed. So, just how is trust developed?

Simply put, trust takes time. Think of relationships you have entered into. Eventually, the only way we get to know those people is for them (and you) to self-disclose, that is, to share something of who they are and what they think and feel. In beginning relationships, this can be risky business. We are not always sure that what we share will be accepted, honored or respected by another until we take the plunge. Trust develops over time as more is shared and the sharing becomes mutual. In other words, for you to get to know me, there needs to be significant encounters of sharing so that trust can form between us. This rarely happens immediately or fast. A pastor can share of himself in visits, newsletters, letters, sermons, greeting people on Sunday, etc. In the average-size congregation, folk wisdom says that it takes five to seven years for such trust to develop and for the pastor to feel that he has finally “arrived.”¹²

It is important in the beginning of a ministry that people feel accepted — that people know you have accepted them as their pastor and that they have accepted you as well. Is there a sense in your congregation that you like each other? And that they know you won’t leave them? Some people are concerned that you won’t stick around because of past experiences.

As you collect data and information about your congregation and people, you go a long way in understanding where they have been and where they are now — and where you might be going. People appreciate that you have done your homework. You can then begin to formulate goals together. Why are we here? What are we supposed to do together? Where are we going?

Finally, there is the issue of control. My own experience has been to teach on the fact that this is Christ’s Church. None of us own it. By leading

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 5.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 34.

¹² Ibid, p. ix.

more and more people into God's Word, the Spirit can operate to build trust and common goals together over time.

In his research, Ludwig identifies four issues under the rubric of "paying your dues." These four issues, if dealt with, can go a long way in establishing trust between a pastor and congregation.

Issue #1: Picking the battles to fight

There are only so many bullets in the gun and so many dollars in the wallet. Pastors have limited bullets or currency to use in fighting battles within the parish. Using them wisely is sage advice. Not every struggle, battle or disagreement is worth being crucified over. Choosing which battles we are willing to fight and which ones we are willing to concede is good common sense and smart ministry. It shows we can listen to another's ideas and opinions and be reasonable in our response to them.

Issue #2: Losing with grace

The pastor teaches and guides. The congregation votes. Losing a battle with grace shows maturity in the long run. It says, "I may not agree, but the wisdom and the wishes of the congregation are part of why I serve here. Let's move on." God may have better plans than the ones I have in mind. The pastor ultimately trusts that God will guide and lead the congregation through Word and Sacrament ministry, trusting in His grace and mercy.

Issue #3: Winning as a team victory

Being in a parish ministry is not about winning or losing. It is about service. Service to God, to one another and to the community and world. I have learned over the years that the time it takes to build consensus in the congregation is well worth it. When decisions are ultimately made, they have been made through much study, prayer, talking and listening to one another. Of course, you also cannot expect everyone in the congregation to be "on board" either. Rather, take the time to bring the leaders on board and build consensus with them.

Issue #4: Effecting change

There is no clear consensus in the church regarding the issue of leadership. There is another PALS course available that will better deal with this issue (*Leading Positive Change in Congregations* by Dr. David Peter). Let it suffice to say that effecting change in healthy and faithful ways is a down payment on the future relationship between pastor and congregation.

Discussion Question

Take some time now to discuss these four issues.

For Further Study and Discussion

- › thomrainer.com/2014/09/29/ten-traits-pastors-healthy-long-term-tenure

Session Four: Monitoring Burnout

The Alban Institute has developed five pillars that are needed to support effective long-term pastorates.¹³

Pillar #1: Monitoring burnout

One of the most important qualities we have in ministry is vitality — or to put it another way, our energy and health. We need to be good stewards of ourselves, as the ministry tends to take every ounce of effort and time we choose to give it.

In an article titled “Clergy Burnout,” Shannon Pearson writes: “The Pastors Institute in Indianapolis recently concluded a study in which it asked those who recently left the pastorate their reasons for leaving, and the results were astounding. The top three reasons cited by former ministers included disillusionment, fatigue, and burnout, and the need to resign in order to leave a stressful situation.”¹⁴

Stress and burnout have become rather chic terms in our culture. Everyone talks about how busy they are or how stressed out they are. Stress is a factor in clergy lives early on in a ministry (some say the first 10 years or so), a by-product of dealing with all the newness, the novelty and the change as one begins a call. It is the strain that we feel on our physical, psychological, emotional and, yes, spiritual selves. It is the pressure we know only too well as we seek to be faithful to our calls.

Burnout occurs after the novelty and newness wear off, and it can be lethal to effective ministry. Burnout makes us dull, hollow and empty. The Alban Institute estimates that one out of five clergy suffer from burnout.¹⁵

Perhaps the best definition of burnout comes

13 Oswald, Roy M., Hinand, Gail D., Hobgood, William C., and Lloyd, Barbara M. *New Visions for a Long Pastorate*. The Alban Institute, Washington, D.C., 1983, pp. 42-71.

14 Pearson, Shannon L. “Why Pastors Leave the Ministry.” *Church Executive*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 2002), p. 22.

15 Ludwig, p. 40.

from John Sanford in his work *Ministry Burnout*. He suggests that the phenomenon of dissipation and disengagement, which we commonly call burnout, may arise from a lack of meaning rather than from a lack of energy. In other words, people appear to burn out in the church not necessarily because they are overworked, but because they are overburdened with the trivial and the unimportant.¹⁶

To understand what Sanford is getting at, burnout can occur when energy is being expended without fuel being added. This deficiency of “fuel” can mean several things. For Lutheran pastors, it could mean a weak devotional life. The pastor uses God’s Word as a means to preach or prepare Bible studies — to do work. Even when we are in worship, we are so involved in doing the liturgy that we may not be receiving God’s gifts to us. Or it may mean that he doesn’t often use the Word for his own personal devotional life or benefit. A spiritual mentor or “Father Confessor” is a valuable help that all pastors should seek out. A brother pastor or a retired pastor whom one trusts can listen and provide Word and Sacrament ministry (confession and absolution), prayers, mutual study and counsel — all of which can often be neglected in the ministry. Sanford would suggest that in order to stay committed to our callings, we need to find continual meaning in our work — that is, we burnout when we can no longer find meaning. Even the smallest of pastoral actions can drain us. Rightly understood, burnout is the result of a lack of meaning in what we do.

In another PALS course, Dr. Beverly Yahnke speaks more on this subject in her sessions on *Pastoral Referrals*. Issues like stress, burnout, physical and mental illness, physical and/or emotional exhaustion, cynicism, disillusionment, depression and/or self-depreciation are all covered in her presentation — generally and specifically. Burnout is really a disease of the overcommitted and, pastors, by the very sense of their call, are among the most committed to their vocations.

16 Willimon, William, *Clergy and Laity Burnout*. Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1989, p. 25.

It goes without saying that we all must do our ministries within the confines of the human body, and all bodies have limitations. Individually, those limitations caused by stress and overcommitment can slow us down and make us ineffective. And if we draw out that metaphor and use it collectively, a pastor with burnout will affect the communal body of the church in negative ways. Burnout affects, in other words, not just the pastor, but the pastor's family and the congregation as a whole.

Discussion Questions:

1. In the average North American church, the majority of "first" calls last, on average, four to six years. Why do you think this might be?

2. Why is it difficult for many to reach that seven-year mark where usually (in a healthy situation) the pastor begins to help the congregation realize its goals? Do you even agree that it takes about seven years for the pastor's teaching ministry, priorities and leadership to begin to take effect?

3. Does the size of the congregation matter? How so?

4. When Glenn Ludwig writes about the pastor having "finally arrived," what might he mean?

5. Can you give some examples where you recently:

- a. Chose not to engage in a "battle"?
- b. Lost in grace?
- c. Took some time to build consensus before making a decision? Describe.

6. Are you involved in any stressful situations right now? How are you dealing with it?

7. Are there any instances in your ministry where there might be a "lack of meaning" developing in your tasks (e.g., folding bulletins Saturday night)? Discuss ways in which you can understand God working even through the "mundane" things of ministry.

8. How do you seek out opportunities to worship and receive God’s gifts?

9. Have you sought out a “Father Confessor” — someone you can trust to guide you spiritually and listen to your confession privately? If not, make out a list of some men who would possibly fulfill this role for you. Contact one of them in the next month.

10. How are your congregation and family being affected by your tendency to be overcommitted to some things?

11. Read together the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 18 and 19. What factors lead to his stress and disillusionment? How did the Lord eventually provide for Elijah?

12. Review the following “Strategies to Deal with Burnout”¹⁷ below:

- a. *Spiritual formation.* This has to do with remembering who we are and whose we are as baptized children of God, forgiven and cleansed through the blood of Christ. (Take a moment to share a Scripture verse with each other reminding one another who you are in Christ). If burnout is a loss of meaning, then remembering who we are and what we are called to do will always serve us well. Continue to dwell on God’s promises for you!
- b. *Time out.* Role ambiguity can lead to overextending ourselves. Sometimes expectations of the pastor can be unrealistic. Make sure your leaders understand your role and responsibilities, and agree upon them together. Times of rest are very important. Do you take at least one full day off per week? Sometimes two? Do you use all of your vacation days? The development of a sabbatical policy in the congregation is not only a good idea but should become the norm in any setting. It is wise to develop such a policy with the governing board early in one’s ministry so that they can help educate and prepare the congregation in advance of taking the sabbatical. Roy Oswald’s video “Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical”¹⁸ has helped congregations develop a sabbatical policy. Also, your district should have sabbatical policies or guidelines to help you work through this important way to care for the pastor. The key is time away, whether for a couple of weeks or a year — it is used to restore vitality.
- c. *Support network.* Finding other pastors and wives who are willing to share in the struggles and joys of ministry is very supportive. (How has the PALS program been a benefit to you? What about your circuit winkel?) It is important, however, that these gatherings allow for open and honest

¹⁷ Ludwig, pp. 43-44.

¹⁸ Oswald, Roy M. “Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical.” The Alban Institute, Bethesda, MD, 2001.

conversation under the strictest rule of confidentiality.

- d. *Regular exercise.* This is a wonderful antidote to depression. Working the endorphins in the brain helps us to think more positively. Perhaps the congregation can assist you in purchasing a health club membership?
- e. *Therapy.* There are times in the ministry when a trained professional may be needed to help restore balance and vitality. This is especially true if cynicism gets too deep or too prolonged. A good therapist can help us deal with those issues that we cannot deal with in the context of our parishes. The district office should have available resources to help direct you to the proper person.
- f. *A new interest.* Sometimes we need to focus on a new project. An avocation can bring new vitality into our lives. This can usually happen outside of our ministry when we take up a certain hobby, sport or recreation. Share with the group something you do to help you refocus and “get away.”

Discussion Questions:

Check and see if your district has a Sabbatical Policy or Sabbatical Guidelines for its workers. If not, a good Sabbatical Guideline can be found in the LCMS Southeastern District’s website at se.lcms.org/uploads/sedsabguideline.pdf.

Session Five: Developing Support Systems

In your last group discussion, you started to talk about sabbaticals. Of all the ideas mentioned in these lessons, this is one that takes discipline and intention. Many have found great value in taking an extended time away. This also includes time away for educational purposes, training and retreats — to find “rest” in Christ, who said “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).

So far, I have covered only one of the five pillars referenced: monitoring burnout. The other four — balancing individual and corporate needs (Gap Theory), balancing power and decision-making, seeking quality feedback, and sustaining growth and seeking depth — will be explored in another PALS presentation.

Now I would like you to meet a young pastor named “Brian.” He recently graduated from one of our Synod’s seminaries. He is bright and articulate. He has been an excellent student. He had a really good experience at his vicarage assignment. He grew in the practice of ministry and learned many things. All his life, he was influenced by several pastors who modeled ministry for him in helpful, Christ-like ways — models of dedication, compassion and commitment. Serving a rural parish out of the seminary, he was well liked from the beginning. Although he wasn’t the best preacher in the world, he was nevertheless loved by the people in his congregation whom he had given tireless and selfless devotion. From all reports, he had both the head and the heart to be an effective pastor.

However, in his first call, Brian quickly discovered that there were some things about the parish ministry that were not taught at seminary. One of them was how to deal with the difficulty of the ghost of the former pastor hovering around. It seems that Brian’s leadership style was being

called into question at every turn. “He is not like Pastor _____.” “Pastor _____ would have done it this way.” “Why can’t you be more like our beloved Pastor _____?”

This situation has caused a lot of sleepless nights and self-doubt. This whole thing hit a boiling point when, during a congregational meeting, someone asked why Brian was called to be a pastor to their parish since he obviously had few skills that they needed. The words hurt like nothing Brian had ever experienced before. Nothing, it seems, during his seminary training had prepared him for how to handle the pain and range of emotions that this was causing. His wife was a good listener, but the pain was her pain too. And Brian was afraid that she would turn bitter and resentful toward the congregation. How should he handle himself? What could he do that would help him deal with his growing disillusionment about parish ministry? Why hadn’t anyone prepared him for this kind of situation?

Our seminaries do a great job in preparing our future pastors for service. They can’t do it all, however. Someone once said that if you wanted to train a person completely for ministry, it would take a lifetime, and there is a measure of truth to that. In the fictional story above, Brian was not taught at the seminary level how to take care of himself by developing support systems that would help him stay healthy. I think that we have too much of this “Lone Ranger” mentality in the ministry. We might be taught to do it all, do it well and be the pillar of strength and leadership that the congregations are looking for.

The problem is, the Lone Ranger gets lonely. We simply are not taught to build a network of supportive colleagues who have been there to comfort, guide and challenge us during the critical times in the life of our ministry. In short, how does the Lone Ranger deal with the “lone” part of the office?

Depending upon the responsibilities, duties, education and training of the board of elders or deacons, these men can and should be there

as the support the pastor needs. It has been my experience that this is not always the case. Most leadership boards are filled with sincere and caring people who have an intrinsic desire to help the congregation grow and fulfill its mission and ministry. However, like most in the parish, our leaders are not specifically trained (or even aware) to be intentional to help meet the needs of the pastor (and his family, for that matter).

I strongly believe that building a support system in the parish (or outside of the parish) becomes crucial when considering a long-term and effective ministry. I have learned some things over the years. First, there needs to be a facilitator or leader at the center of this group. The leader will help provide direction and will help hold the group together over time. Second, this leader will help keep the dialogue and discussion focused, open, honest and real. Sometimes it is necessary to bring in an outsider to function in this role — and sometimes it is necessary to pay them. When money is exchanged, there can be a sense of investment and ownership. The choice of the people in the group is done with great care (examples). Usually the optimal size is six to eight people.

Even the most informed and knowledgeable members of our parishes do not know, nor can we expect them to know, the range of emotions and the depth of feelings that go with the office of pastor. They can empathize, but not in the same way as other pastors who know the joys and struggles firsthand. That is why building relationships with your brothers (and sisters) in the ministry at PALS and winkels is vital for support and growth.

One way that a congregation can show support for a pastor and continue to enjoy a healthy relationship for the long haul is to develop a pastor-parish relations committee (or staff-parish).

This committee's sole function is to monitor the quality of the relationship between the pastor and congregation. Since this relationship is key to the ongoing life of a congregation and absolutely

essential if there is to be a long-term pastorate, this committee holds an important function for the well-being of the pastor, his family and the congregation. This committee should not be the one to deal with personnel issues, such as job descriptions, performance evaluations, salary decisions or personnel policies. Others will handle these roles. Nor should the pastor-parish committee be the collection area for complaints from members of the congregation. Normally, the board of elders or deacons does this.

Rather, members of this committee should work to understand the pastor's perspective as well as his hopes, dreams and needs. In addition, they should seek to relate to the pastor's family in a way that offers ongoing support and encouragement. They should also seek to convey to the pastor their understanding of the congregation's life. They become, in a sense, the voice for the congregation as it responds to the hopes and perspective of the pastor. In this way, a safe environment can be developed for mutual and honest sharing. It is only when a congregation and pastor truly understand one another that their relationship can stay healthy and even grow and thrive.

One good resource for forming such a committee is Roy Oswald's video "Why You Should Develop a Pastor-Parish Relations Committee."¹⁹

Take some time now to discuss the possibilities of forming a pastoral care committee in your church.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think your congregation needs to be intentional in forming a distinctive pastoral support group?

¹⁹ Oswald, Roy M. "Why You Should Develop a Pastor-Parish Relations Committee." The Alban Institute, Bethesda, MD, 2001.

2. What would be the goals of such a group?

3. What would you see as the lifespan of this group?

4. Who should be chosen to serve in such a group? What qualities would add to the effectiveness of this group?

5. How and by what process should this group be chosen?

6. Who would you consider as the leader/facilitator of the group?

7. What do you see their role being in the support of your family?

8. Look at the “Ad Hoc Committee Proposal” and “Caring Ministry Partners & Staff” documents in the appendix. Could something like this be utilized in your setting? What changes could you make to these documents? How might you get started?

Conclusion

Read “A Long-Term Pastorate” by the Rev. Philip Meyer.²⁰

As he refers to Christ, Luther says:

Discipleship is not limited to what you can comprehend — it must transcend all comprehension. Plunge into the deep waters beyond your own comprehension, and I will help you to comprehend even as I do. Bewilderment is the true comprehension. Not to know where you are going is the true knowledge. My comprehension transcends yours. Thus Abraham went forth from his father and not knowing whither he went. He trusted himself to my knowledge, and cared not for his own, and thus he took the right road and came to his journey’s end. Behold, that is the way of the cross. You cannot find it yourself, so you must let me lead you as though you were a blind man. Wherefore it is not you, no man, no living creature, but I myself, who instruct you by my word and Spirit in the way you should go. Not the work which you choose, not the suffering you devise, but the road which is clean contrary to all that you choose or contrive or desire — that is the road you must take. To that I call you and in that you must be my disciple.

Final Word

Review “What to Do When You Receive a Call” in the appendix and discuss together.

²⁰ Meyer, Philip. “A Long-Term Pastorate” in *Formation: Essays for Future Pastors*. Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2008, pp. 93-94.

Appendix 1

Dec. 6, 2010 Ad Hoc Committee Proposal

“Caring Ministry Partners”

In January 2011, St. John’s Lutheran Church will establish a group called “Caring Ministry Partners.” It will be the primary responsibility of this group to meet with church and school staff on a regular basis to provide spiritual and emotional support as they serve in their different capacities. The following recommendations will apply:

1. This group shall consist of 7 people. One person each from the Board of Education, Board of Elders, Personnel Board, and another person serving on a board, two representatives from the church at-large who are not serving on a board or committee and the congregational chairman (ex officio).

2. The senior pastor, in consultation with the associate pastor, school principal and congregational chairman, will select each individual to serve.

3. Those people selected will serve for three years or when their board term expires, whichever comes first. The member(s) at-large will serve for three years.

4. This group will meet a minimum of 3 times per calendar year with the staff as a whole and individually when needed.

5. A yearly orientation for the group will be conducted.

“Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:25).

Appendix 2

May 3, 2011 Caring Ministry Partners & Staff

Opening Devotion and Prayer

Introductions:

An opportunity for the Caring Ministry team to share their names and why they said “yes” to serve in this special way.

Purpose of Caring Ministry Partners:

To care for the staff of St. John’s Lutheran Church and School through a ministry of deep listening, compassionate caring, encouragement and affirmation, and regular prayer.

The desired outcome of this ministry will be improved holistic health and wellness of the staff, including their families. This includes spiritual, intellectual, emotional, relational, physical, vocational and environmental health and well-being.

Expectations:

Caring Ministry Partners will meet with the staff at least three times a year, both as a large group and in small groups. (One Caring Ministry Partner to three or four staff.) Caring Ministry Partners, in pairs, will also be available for conversation with individuals, as needed and requested. Normally, meetings should be no longer than one hour in length.

Important Issues:

- › The power of listening and being heard.
- › This ministry is preventative, focused on

fostering health and wellness not on “curing disease.”

- › Avoiding the potential of becoming a gripe session.
- › Avoiding triangulation (using Matthew 18).
- › Being clear about what cannot be done (e.g., doubling your pay).
- › Helping all to claim what they can do (e.g., choosing Sabbath rest; prioritizing your work; asking for help; involving members of the congregation and school community in serving; making time for family commitments; making healthy choices in eating, exercise, and sleep; etc.).
- › Checking in and following up.
- › Making sure that all voices are heard and that no one voice dominates.

Topics to Consider and Questions to Ask:

- › What brings you the most joy and satisfaction in your ministry?
- › What can we celebrate in your ministry?
- › What challenges or roadblocks do you face in doing your best ministry?
- › How are you caring for yourself? (Consider all the areas of wellness.)
- › How are you caring for your family and for family time?
- › How can we pray for you?

Appendix 3

What to Do When You Receive a Call

1. Acknowledge immediately your receipt of the call by sending a letter of acknowledgment to the calling congregation. Send copies of the letter to the following:

- a) Your district president
- b) The president of the district in which the calling congregation is located
- c) Your district mission executive, if your congregation is receiving district mission subsidy
- d) Your circuit visitor
- e) The circuit visitor of the circuit in which the calling congregation is located
- f) The vacancy pastor serving the calling congregation

2. Notify the members of your congregation that you have received the call. In addition, read or publish the letter that has been sent by the calling congregation to your congregation.

3. Set a meeting date (congregational meeting, voters’ meeting) to discuss the call with the members of your congregation.

4. Deliberate on the call. In this regard, pray fervently, asking God to help you determine:

- a) Am I still needed where I am?
- b) Would it be beneficial for my present congregation if I stay?
- c) Would it be beneficial for my present congregation if I leave?
- d) Is the Lord challenging me to use my gifts in a different part of the Kingdom at this time?
- e) Is the Lord challenging me to develop another gift that I have in a different part of the Kingdom?

5. Notify the calling congregation, in writing, of your decision regarding the call. Send copies of the letter to the following:

- a) Your district president
- b) The president of the district in which the calling congregation is located
- c) Your district mission executive, if your congregation is receiving district mission subsidy
- d) Your circuit visitor
- e) The circuit visitor of the circuit in which the calling congregation is located
- f) The vacancy pastor serving the calling congregation

6. Notify the members of your congregation of your decision regarding the call.

Some Do's and Don'ts

- › Do pray fervently, asking the Lord to show you His will regarding the call.
- › Do seek the advice of your circuit visitor or district president if you feel this would be helpful in reaching a decision regarding the call.
- › Do ask for the advice, comments and prayers of your members.
- › Do not negotiate a compensation package with the calling congregation. If the salary is inadequate, decline the call. In doing so, indicate that the salary is inadequate, and recommend that the congregation review the compensation package prior to extending their next call. But do not indicate that you are open to receiving the call again if the compensation package is adjusted.
- › Do not accept or reject the call on the basis of any contingencies (if I can sell my house, if the congregation will give me the down payment to buy a house, etc.).
- › Do not let home ownership (or the purchasing of a home) determine your decision regarding a call.
- › Do not request an on-site visit at the expense of the congregation if it is not offered by the congregation. (Congregations are encouraged to extend such an invitation to the pastor after he has been extended a call.)
- › Do be cautious about accepting an invitation to visit the congregation. (Ask yourself, is it really necessary? If not, be a good steward of the congregation's resources and decline the offer to visit.)
- › Do reach a decision without delay (normally within two to four weeks of receiving the call documents). If you are unable to reach a clear decision regarding the call within four weeks, decline it.



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