

# The Doctrine and Practice of the Call in the WELS

By Paul M. Janke

[Presented to the Arizona-California District Pastoral Conference, Grace Lutheran Church, Tucson, AZ, October 25-28, 1999]

## I. The Doctrine of the Call

A call is a divine summons to a task. To understand the biblical doctrine of the call to the public ministry of the word, it is necessary, first of all, to understand the doctrines of church and ministry.

The church, Luther said, is “the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd.”<sup>1</sup> The apostle Paul was describing the holy Christian church when he addressed one of his epistles “To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, *together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” (1 Cor. 1:2) This church is called “invisible” because we can’t read hearts to know who has faith in Jesus and thus belongs to the *Una Sancta*. God alone knows those who are his. Yet we do know that his church will be found wherever the gospel of Christ is rightly preached and his sacraments are rightly administered<sup>2</sup>, because God has promised that his word will not return to him empty. (Is. 55:11)

So that his church might grow, God established the ministry of the gospel.<sup>3</sup> This ministry of the gospel, or ministry of the keys, as our catechism called it, was entrusted by Christ to his church. “The use of the keys is the special power and right which Christ gave to his church on earth...” (See John 20:21-23) Through faith in Jesus every believer is a priest of God: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Pet. 2:9)

Go back to the very beginning of the church and you will find that there have always been people who served publicly (that is, as representatives of other believers) in the ministry of the gospel. Paul addressed Philipians to “all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with *the overseers and deacons.*” (Php. 1:1) In Acts 14 we read that “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord.” (14:23)

This public ministry of the word came about not merely by human arrangement or as a matter of expediency, but by divine institution. “It was (Christ) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers...” (Eph. 4:11)

There is just one public ministry of the gospel, but as the passage above shows, this ministry takes a variety of forms. The list in Ephesians 4 doesn’t exhaust all of the possible forms of the public ministry. (For another list, see 1 Cor. 12:28-30) Christians are free to devise the forms of the public ministry of the gospel that fit their circumstances and will assist them in carrying out their commission to proclaim the gospel.

When Christ gave his church the authority to proclaim the gospel, he also, by implication, gave the church the authority to call ministers of the gospel. Luther wrote, “Since a congregation neither should nor could exist without God’s word, it clearly follows...that it nevertheless must have teachers and preachers who administer the word.”<sup>4</sup> In the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, Philip Melancthon tackled the refusal of the Roman bishops to “ordain suitable persons” to the ministry. He asserted that the church has the

---

<sup>1</sup> Smalcald Articles, XII, p. 499, *Trig.*

<sup>2</sup> Apology, Art. XIV, p. 315, *Trig.*

<sup>3</sup> “That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted.” Augsburg Confession, Art. V, p. 45, *Trig.*

<sup>4</sup> “That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture,” *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, Vol. 39, p. 309.

authority to call its own ministers. “For wherever the Church is, there is the authority to administer the Gospel. Therefore it is necessary for the Church to retain the authority to call, elect, and ordain ministers.”<sup>5</sup>

In Old Testament times and through the time of the apostles, the call to serve in the public ministry often came directly from God. Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel received direct calls. In Isaiah’s case, the LORD asked, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” Isaiah responded, “Here am I. Send me!” And the LORD said, “Go and tell this people...” The LORD told Jeremiah, “You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.” (Jer. 1:7) To Ezekiel the LORD said, “Son of man, go now to the house of Israel and speak my words to them.” (Ezek. 3:4) One famous New Testament direct call was extended when the Lord Jesus told Saul, “Get up and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.” (Acts 22:10)

In Acts 13, though, we see the Holy Spirit involving the congregation as men are commissioned for world missionary work. While the church in Antioch was worshiping and fasting, the Spirit told them, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” (Acts 13:2) In Titus 1:5 it appears that the church in Crete worked with Titus to respond to the need for public ministers of the word. “The reason I left you on Crete,” Paul wrote to Titus, “was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.”

Whether the call is direct or indirect makes no difference: the call to the public ministry is a call from God. A call is a divine summons to a task. It is the Lord of the harvest who sends out workers into his harvest field. (Matt. 9:38) Paul charged the Ephesian elders to keep watch over “all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” (Acts 20:28) It was Christ “who gave some to be...pastors and teachers.” (Eph. 4:11) This is why we refer to a call to the public ministry as a divine call. This is why the pastor’s call form that we commonly use says, “We trust that you will recognize in this CALL the voice of your Lord Jesus Christ, and we pray that he, the Head of the church, may give you willingness and strength joyfully to follow it...” The Lord works indirectly today, through his church, to call Christians to the public ministry of the word, but it is still the Lord who does the calling.

Because the authority to extend calls belongs to the entire body of believers, it would be disorderly, to say the least, for someone to take for himself an office to which he has not been called. When the infant Lutheran church rejected ordination as a sacrament, the Catholic church replied with the charge that Lutheran practice was disorderly. Among the radical wing of the Reformation there was some basis for this charge, for example, with men claiming to have heard a call from God but possessing no call from the church. Luther spoke of the “sectarians, who despise (the mediate call) and boast of another calling, whereby they say the Spirit impels them to teach.”<sup>6</sup> It was for this reason, apparently, that the Augsburg Confession in its briefest article says, “Of Ecclesiastical Order they teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called.” The Latin word translated “regularly” is *rite*. The German word is *ordentlichen*, orderly. While ordination was rejected as a sacrament, it was not rejected entirely. The call makes a pastor a pastor (as is also the case with a teacher or a staff minister), but the ceremony of ordination certifies that the person being ordained has been properly trained and possesses a legitimate call from a body of believers.

Lest anyone think that this principle is simply a manifestation of the larger quest for orderliness that seems to be characteristic of so many Germans, it should be noted that “the office seeks the man, not the man the office” has its source in Scripture. Aaron, the high priest, was “selected from among men and...appointed to represent them in matters related to God” (Heb. 5:1). So, too, Christ “did not take upon himself the glory of becoming high priest. But God said to him, ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’” What was true of public ministry of the word in Old Testament times remains true of the public ministry of the word in New Testament times: “No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was.” (Heb. 5:4) St. Paul is referring to the same principle when he asks the familiar question in Romans 10, “And how can they preach unless they are sent?” (Rom. 10:15a)

<sup>5</sup> Triglotta, par. 67, p. 523.

<sup>6</sup> *What Luther Says*, Vol. 2, #2970, p. 946.

Even as Luther was defending the right of Christian congregations to call their own pastors, he also discouraged men from applying for specific offices in the church. “If he is at a place where there are Christians who have the same power and right as he, he should not draw attention to himself. Instead, he should let himself be called and chosen to preach and to teach in the place of and by the command of others.”<sup>7</sup> And again, “Remain where you are until you are called; do not seek another call; do not impose yourself on others; for your proficiency is not so great that it will burst open your belly...If God desires to have you, He will seek you out, yea, even send an angel from heaven to lead you where he desires to have you.”<sup>8</sup> While Luther was strong in his insistence that the keys have been given to the priesthood of all believers, he also added the caution,

This, however, we have said of the *common* rights and powers of all Christians. For since all these things of which we have spoken should be common to all Christians, even as we have shown and proved, it will not be proper that one should of his own accord put himself into the foreground and appropriate to himself what belongs to us all.<sup>9</sup>

Along with the request to write this paper came the instruction to address the issue of whether there are aberrations that would render a call merely the working of man, rather than divine. Fritz in his *Pastoral Theology* makes a distinction between a valid call and a legitimate call. By this distinction a valid call is “extended by those whom God has given the right to do so” and a legitimate call is one that “has been procured in the right manner.”<sup>10</sup>

For a call to be valid it has to be issued by a body that has the authority to call. The authority to call belongs to Christ’s church, to the people to whom he gave the keys. Therefore a call issued by the government would not be valid, nor would a call that came from a business or from just one individual. A body of believers can, however, delegate its right to issue a call, as for example when congregations place a request for a pastor or teacher candidate before the assignment committee. We also delegate to mission boards, administrative committees, and worker training school boards of control the authority to issue calls.

For a call to be legitimate, it must have been received without “pulling strings” or bribery or any other underhanded means. “Only such a call is legitimate as has been received without one’s own initiative, which one accepts for conscience sake, because persuaded by others to do so and by one’s obedience to God and one’s love to one’s neighbor.”<sup>11</sup> Sometimes it’s not the pastor who goes to the congregation in search of a call, but the congregation (or other organization) that goes to pastors (or teachers) to try to determine whether a man would seriously consider the call that’s about to be issued. It’s actually a request to do a preliminary consideration of a call. The proper response to such inquiries is to say, “I have a call.” Until a valid call actually comes, there’s nothing to consider. We find ourselves in a different situation, however, when congregations wish to call retired pastors to part-time service. There we cannot assume, as we can with our active clergy roster, that a retired man is even available for a call. For that reason we generally make some phone calls to the men we have in mind before including them on a list.

Some calls are by nature temporary: vicar calls, tutor calls, vacancy pastor calls, calls to fill in for a pastor or teacher while he recovers from illness or surgery. But a temporary call that has the goal of subjecting the called worker to a probationary period of service is heading down the road to a “hire-and-fire mentality” which is inappropriate in the church. It allows for the possibility that the person’s ministry is going to be judged by standards other than the ones the Lord himself has set for his servants. The time for the “testing” described in 1 Timothy 3:10 (“They must first be tested...”) is before the call has been issued, not after. The Lord has carefully described the qualifications he wishes to have in those who serve in the public ministry. Either the person meets those qualifications and can be called, or he doesn’t meet them and shouldn’t be called. The Lord

---

<sup>7</sup> “That a Christian Assembly Has the Right to Judge...,” p. 310.

<sup>8</sup> Luther, quoted in *Pastoral Theology*, John H.C. Fritz, p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Fritz, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> Fritz, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

has also prescribed the remedy for those who once met his standards, but don't any longer. There is a procedure for dealing with those who have proven themselves unfaithful. But for the church to adopt the personnel procedures of the local police department or the university won't be in the best interests of the called worker or the calling body.

The doctrine of the call is, on the one hand, a sobering warning. It's a warning to the minister of the gospel who is tempted to be lazy or unchaste. It's a warning to the called worker who has fallen into a pattern of merely going through the motions of his ministry, determined to get by with as little as the congregation will permit. We are not simply office professionals, earning a living however we might, scribbling sermons like another man might write ad copy, or doing evangelism work like another man might offer sales proposals. We are not, like the members of some labor unions, attempting to put forth as little effort as possible for the greatest possible remuneration, with the ultimate goal of living a soft life. A call is a divine summons to a task. Behind the voters' assembly that voted to call us stood the Lord Jesus, calling us to labor in his fields, under his direction, and accountable ultimately to him. Here belong those words of James that make our flesh so uncomfortable: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." (James 3:1) Paul spoke to our situation, too, when he wrote, "So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful." (1 Cor. 4:1-2)

Though it is God's will for all Christians "that you should be sanctified" (1 Thess. 4:3), the called servants of Christ have added reason to live self-controlled and godly lives. With the great privilege of our office comes the added responsibility of living a life that reflects well on the ministry and on the Christian faith. Paul instructed his young colleague, Timothy, to "set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith, and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching." A bit later he wrote, "Watch your life and your doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers." (1 Tim. 4:12,13,16) Conferences like this one are a time for study of the word, for encouragement from the Scriptures and from our brothers in the ministry, and, yes, for relaxation in the company of men who can sympathize with our struggles and share our joys and sorrows. These conferences are more than beneficial; they're necessary for strengthening our faith and building up the brotherhood. But when the focus drifts from study and worship to vacation and recreation, we may be losing sight of the high purpose of these gatherings. Let's encourage each other by word and example to make the best possible use of our conferences.

The doctrine of the divine call also serves as a great comfort to the pastor (or teacher or staff minister). For the called worker, the doctrine of the call is the assurance that we serve where we serve not due to the plans of men or by accident, but by God's design. When we face trials, we can go to the Lord who appointed us to our field of labor and seek his strength to continue. When we face opposition for our faithfulness to Christ's name, we can give our own version of Amos' reply to Amaziah, the wicked priest of Bethel: "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore fig trees. *But the LORD took me* from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' Now then hear the word of the LORD." (Amos 7:14-16a) In other words, I am here speaking to you by divine appointment and not on account of my whims or anyone else's. Luther's sacristy prayer gives evidence of the comfort he found in his call: "Lord God, you have appointed me to be a bishop, a pastor in your church." Were it not for the call by which God appointed him to his ministry, Dr. Martin acknowledged, he "would long since have ruined it all."<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the call serves as a warning to those we've been called to serve. The call is a warning that disrespect, dishonor, and contempt directed toward the called worker doesn't stop there. It is inevitably also disrespect, dishonor, and contempt for the Lord Jesus himself. "He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me," the Savior said. (Luke 10:16) As little as David was willing to lift a hand against the king God appointed to reign over Israel (Saul), so little should

---

<sup>12</sup> *By Word and Prayer*, George Kraus, p. 20.

members of the congregation be willing to lift a hand against the pastor, teacher, or staff minister that God has appointed to serve them.

On the other hand, the call is also a comfort to a congregation. The people can view their pastor or teacher as the one God has sent them to edify and equip them, to admonish and comfort them, to serve and lead them. The doctrine of the call is what enables a congregation to sing at the installation of their pastor,

*We bid you welcome in the name  
Of Jesus, our exalted head.  
Come as a servant—so he came—  
We shall receive you in his stead.*

*Come as a teacher sent from God  
With his whole counsel to declare.  
Our souls encourage with the Word,  
While we uphold your hands in prayer.  
(CW #547, 1, 3)*

The Bible studies that are commonly conducted before call meetings are designed to help the voters understand the biblical doctrine of the call. It would be good, however, if this important Bible teaching were addressed more often and more widely than at the forum that a call meeting provides. Prof. Armin Schuetze's contribution to the People's Bible Teaching series, *Church-Mission-Ministry*, and the Bible study that was written to accompany it,<sup>13</sup> are excellent resources to help us and our people grow in our appreciation for the doctrine of the divine call.

## II. WELS Practice Regarding the Divine Call

There is no specific method of extending calls prescribed by Scripture. We have previously mentioned two passages in the New Testament which refer to the appointing of elders, in one case by Paul and Barnabas ("appointed elders for them in each church"—Acts 14:23) and in the other case by Titus ("straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town"—Titus 1:5). The word "appoint" is not the same word in both passages, however. In Acts 14:23 the word is a participle from χειροτονέω, which means "to choose, to elect by raising hands." Note the root χεῖρ, hand. In Titus 1:5 the verb is a form of καθίστημι, "to ordain, appoint," used in Hebrews 5:1, 7:28, and 8:3 with reference to the appointment of the high priest in Israel and to the appointment of Jesus Christ as our great high priest.

In neither case, though, do these passages indicate that Paul and Barnabas or Titus made unilateral decisions as to who would serve as elders in the congregations in Asia Minor, Syria, or Crete. Lenski comments on Acts 14:23,

Luke would make an important point by using this verb (χειροτονέω) here. For the question at issue is whether Paul and Barnabas chose elders without congregational participation or whether they conducted a congregational meeting in which a vote was taken by a show of hands, the congregation choosing with participation of the apostles and under their guidance. The latter is undoubtedly correct...<sup>14</sup>

Martin Chemnitz describes the call process in the early church this way:

<sup>13</sup> *Church-Mission-Ministry*, James R. Janke, NPH.

<sup>14</sup> *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, R.C.H. Lenski, p. 585-586.

Therefore to avoid confusion, at the time of the apostles and also after their time in the ancient and pure church, the matter of the election and call of ministers of the Word was always handled according to a certain order by the chief members of the church in the name and with the consent of the whole church. Thus the apostles first set forth a directive as to what kind of persons are to be chosen for the ministries of the church. Acts 1:15 ff.; 6:2 ff. Then the church, according to that rule of the directive, chose and set forth some. But since the call belongs not only to the multitude or common people in the church, therefore they submitted those who were chosen and nominated to the judgment of the apostles, whether they be fit for that ministry according to the rule of the divine Word. And so the election of the multitude was confirmed by the approval of the apostles.<sup>15</sup>

As you can see, this ancient practice is quite similar to the procedure we commonly follow today at call meetings. The district president, or his representative, usually presents a congregation's voters' assembly with a list of the names of five or so qualified pastors and then guides the congregation in electing one of the pastors to receive the call. The process for calling teachers and staff ministers is very much the same. At times, of course, the list of candidates is presented to a mission board, an administrative committee, or a Lutheran high school board of control. The calling body may differ, but the process is in each case similar.

The agenda for a call meeting typically includes the following: an opening devotion or Bible study (a Bible study on the doctrine of the call being especially helpful at the first call meeting a congregation conducts), an explanation of the calling process and the procedure used in preparing lists, the presentation of the list, discussion of the list, formal acceptance of the list, voting by secret ballot until one candidate receives a majority of the ballots, and finally a resolution to make the vote unanimous. Making the vote unanimous assures the person being called that his call didn't come from just a segment of the congregation, but from the entire congregation. At the first call meeting there is also many times a discussion of vacancy arrangements, of the cover letter, and of the congregation's compensation package. Before the actual call meeting we frequently conduct a "pre-call meeting" to reach a better understanding of the congregation, its ministry, and any special needs that might exist. At that time the congregation is apprised of its right to add names to the call list, but we ask that such nominations be sent to the district president prior to the call meeting so that he can ensure that the use of such names would be appropriate.

We cannot say that it would be wrong to follow another practice, for example, in which the churches delegated to the district president the authority to appoint pastors or teachers for them. Our Lutheran confessions say, "If the bishops would be true bishops, and would devote themselves to the Church and the Gospel, it might be granted to them for the sake of love and unity, but not from necessity, to ordain and confirm us and our preachers; omitting, however, all comedies and spectacular display of unchristian parade and pomp."<sup>16</sup> Our present practice, however, by making provision for the participation of the congregation, helps prevent an abuse of power similar to that perpetrated by the Roman Catholic bishops and against which Luther was protesting in the Smalcald Articles.

The Roman Catholic church and the Methodist church are two examples of denominations that cede to the bishop the authority to decide where its ministers will serve and for how long. In many Protestant churches the practice is for applicants to "candidate" for vacant pastorates. Notice of a vacant parish or pastoral position is posted, applications or resumes are submitted, a pulpit committee sifts through the applications, narrows the list, and then asks some of the top applicants to candidate. The candidates meet with leaders of the congregation, perhaps preach a trial sermon, and then wait to hear the decision of the pulpit committee. Somewhere in this process, of course, a compensation package must be negotiated. This method of filling vacant pulpits would seem to have some shortcomings. What will the congregation be looking for? Faithfulness to God's Word, or charisma and a nice smile? What kind of sermon will the candidating pastor preach? Will it be law and gospel, or will it be a message designed to tickle the ears and make a strong impression on the right

<sup>15</sup> *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, Martin Chemnitz, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> Smalcald Articles, Art. X, p. 314, *Trig.*

people? The whole matter of pastor's resumes seems to overlook Paul's insistence that it was not his gifts or personality that deserved the credit for whatever he'd accomplished in his ministry, but God working through him that achieved it: "...yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." (1 Cor. 15:10)

Since we are so easily influenced by the practices of Protestant churches, it would be surprising if also in the area of calling pastors there were not some Protestant influence felt. We've heard of congregations that have an informal "Schnuffel committee," to snoop around and find out about the men on a call list. We can't say it would be contrary to Scripture to provide more information than we commonly do about the men on a call list. It seems sometimes, though, that the request for more information stems from a lack of trust that the Holy Spirit can do his work through our system or a desire to circumvent the orderly process that we have in place. On the other hand, there could also be pastors who view the reception of a call as the beginning of a negotiating process. Those who receive calls should be careful not to be seen as negotiators, attempting to carve out a more comfortable position for themselves. Those who extend calls should be careful not to present material things as a reason for accepting the call. In my opinion, it would very rarely be necessary for a man holding a call to travel to the church or school to which he's been called. Even if the trip were entirely proper, it could still leave the impression that the pastor is scouting out the parsonage or the community to see whether it's up to his standards.

The calling process that we follow is not prescribed in our synod or district constitution. The constitution says simply,

In case of a vacancy in the pastorate, a congregation shall notify the president of the district so that he may assist the congregation in securing pastoral service during the vacancy. The president shall also counsel the congregation as it extends calls for filling its vacancy. Similar notice shall be given and counsel requested in case a congregation is calling a teacher for its school or a staff minister.<sup>17</sup>

The procedure for preparing lists, once there's an understanding of the congregation's needs, is to prepare a slate of candidates who are deemed to have the right gifts to serve in a particular position. District presidents are assisted in this work by their own knowledge of the men in our ministerium<sup>18</sup>, by their use of the WELS Progress database, which includes personal information about each pastor and teacher, as well as the pastor's own assessment of his gifts, and by the communications that take place between the district presidents. Here again the WELS Constitution says, "The Conference of Presidents shall be responsible...for exchanging information and counsel relative to the most advantageous placement of pastors, professors, and teachers..."<sup>19</sup> It should be obvious, though, that our systems and consultations are not a replacement for the Holy Spirit's guidance and our prayers, but rather a means we use under the Spirit's guidance to carry out our responsibility to counsel congregations seeking pastors and other called workers.

It should be noted that with teacher call lists, the request for a list comes first to the district president, but the district presidents make use of the staff at the Commission on Parish Schools in Milwaukee to develop the lists. The completed list then comes back to the district president, who may add or delete names at his discretion.

With pastor calls, the Conference of Presidents is currently working under the guideline that a man will not be placed on a list before he has served in his current call for four years and also not before six months have elapsed since he last declined a call. This guideline was adopted in large part because we currently have more pastoral vacancies than we have experienced in a longtime. To call the same men over and over again, or to extend calls to them when they've barely had time to get to know the responsibilities of their current call, seems counter-productive. Of course these guidelines are not cast in bronze. District presidents can consent to waive

<sup>17</sup> *Constitution and Bylaws, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1997, p. 34.*

<sup>18</sup> The Conference of Presidents also maintains a list of men who are CRM, *candidatum reverendi ministerii*, meaning that, though they do not currently have a call, they are both eligible and available for a call.

<sup>19</sup> WELS Constitution, p. 2.

them when presented with special situations. And, once in a while, despite our guidelines, a man gets a call before his four years or six months are up. Or sometimes a man may receive two or three calls on the same day. Such incidents only serve to remind us that the Lord is still in charge of the calling process.

With teacher calls there is currently a window during which calls may be extended. This window extends from January 1 to June 30. Extending a call to a teacher between July and December has been considered to be disruptive to the teacher's ministry and to the educational environment where he or she is serving. The window doesn't currently cover teaching pastors (in Lutheran high schools or at MLC or the seminary, for example), since a call to replace a teaching pastor could be extended to another pastor immediately. An Ad Hoc committee is due to report to the Conference of Presidents soon, however, and the committee may recommend some changes in these policies. One other calling window is currently in place: pastoral assistants to district presidents may be extended calls only between January 1 and Call Day at the seminary. This window was put in place because calling a pastoral assistant away from a district president's parish well in advance of call day would likely hinder the work of the district or the parish, or both.

What are we asking a person to consider when he receives a call? Quite simply: we are asking him to consider whether his gifts would best be used where he is currently serving, or whether his gifts could better be used if he were to accept the call that he has now received. The basis for saying this is 1 Corinthians 12:7, "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given *for the common good.*" The question to be answered is not, Is this a step up for me? Or, will this be a more comfortable situation for me? But, Where can the gifts God has given me be put to the best possible use? In general, financial considerations and the attractiveness (or lack of it) of the area to which the person is being called, are not to be considered. If the salary were so low as to cause hardships for the pastor and his family, that would be different. There can also be legitimate concerns about the health of the pastor or members of his family in certain areas of the country. But when there are indications that the person being called is making his decision primarily for financial reasons, or because the parsonage is a palace, or the geographical area is attractive (or not attractive), it only serves to undermine people's confidence in the divinity of the call.

In evaluating a call, it is helpful to hear the counsel of one's congregation (or board), as well as the counsel of one's brothers in the ministry. This is why we encourage men receiving a call to follow the courtesy of informing the district president, the circuit pastor, and, if it applies, the mission board, about the reception of the call. Acknowledgment of a call should be sent to the calling body by return mail as soon as the call document is received. That's a good time to copy the district president of one's own district, as well as the president of the district from which the call came, and the circuit pastor and mission board. E-mail communications are convenient, but it's my opinion that a matter as solemn as the reception of a call deserves to be acknowledged with hard copy.

I tell congregations that the man they call as pastor will likely deliberate about the call for three to six weeks. If more time than that is needed for deliberations, the pastor should write the calling body a letter and explain the need for additional time. In some quarters there seems to be the belief that holding on to a call for less than a month would be an insult to the calling body. That doesn't have to be the case. If a man has had the opportunity to give a call his careful and prayerful consideration, if he's had time to counsel with brothers in the ministry, then there's no insult in returning a call after just two or three weeks. Most congregations would prefer to know early if a man is going to decline a call. That way they can begin arranging to extend another call without delay.

When a decision to accept or decline a call has been announced, it's courteous to inform the calling body by phone of the decision. That way they don't hear about it from another source. Of course, a letter stating the decision should also be sent immediately. Here a word about the letters written to decline calls might be in order. A general principle, in my opinion, is to keep it brief. The more you write, the more you risk. It isn't necessary in most cases to explain all kinds of reasons for declining the call. You were asked to examine your gifts in light of the two calls and make a decision. In declining the call you can simply say that you prayed and carefully considered the call and have reached the decision to decline it. There may be rare cases in which a tactful statement to the congregation about a low compensation or unrealistic expectations may be called for,



but these cases are extremely rare. When returning a call, it is also expected that the call form, as well as any accompanying materials (aside from the cover letter, which is personal), will be returned promptly so that the congregation can reuse those materials in extending another call.

Finally, I was asked to address in this paper the propriety of requesting a call. If a pastor or teacher has reached a point in his ministry where he thinks that his gifts are no longer what the congregation needs, or believes that he's reached an impasse in dealing with the congregation or the board, it is entirely proper to let the district president know about it. It comes under the heading of the district president's responsibility for "the most advantageous placement of pastors, professors, and teachers."<sup>20</sup> The matter would likely be discussed initially with the circuit pastor, whose work in part is to serve as the pastor's pastor. Here, of course, we're not talking merely about a case of *Wanderlust* or a desire to avoid the cross, which all who serve in Christ's name must bear, but a legitimate belief that the kingdom of Christ would be better served by the opportunity to consider a call.

On a related subject, I welcome suggestions of the names of men who might have the gifts to serve particular vacancies in our district. I won't be able to use every suggestion sent my way, but I appreciate the help and the insights that are offered with such suggestions.

Like every other teaching in the Scriptures, the doctrine of the call is precious. This doctrine is precious both to called workers and to Christians in general. For this reason we'll want to make every effort to help both called workers and parishioners understand this blessed doctrine. As you can tell from this paper, there's a great deal that the Scriptures don't specifically tell us about the calling process. For that reason the leaders of our synod have over the years sought with humility and prayer to implement procedures that will allow us to extend calls "in a fitting and orderly way." (1 Cor. 14:40) Though the process by which we write lists and extend calls is not divinely inspired, the call is divine. May the knowledge that the calls we hold constitute a divine summons to our tasks give us joy and strength as we labor for the Lord! And may the Lord who called us keep us faithful, so that we can say with the apostle Paul, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service." (1 Tim. 1:12)

Lord Jesus, it is your office which I hold,  
it is your work I am doing,  
it is your people whom I would build up,  
it is your glory that I seek.  
Help me, therefore, in this hour, that I, poor sinner,  
may do and perform it all according to your most holy will.  
Amen.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> WELS Constitution, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> G.C. Dieffenbach in *By Word and Prayer*, p. 30. Found originally in *Evangelisches Brevier*, 1869.

## Bibliography

*By Word and Prayer: A Pastor's Daily Prayer and Study Guide*, George Kraus, CPH, 1977.

*Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, NPH, 1993.

*Church-Mission-Ministry: The Family of God*, People's Bible Teaching series, Armin W. Schuetze, NPH, 1997.

*Concordia Triglotta: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, CPH, 1921.

*Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, Martin Chemnitz, translated by Luther Poellot, CPH, 1981.

*Pastoral Theology: A Handbook of Scriptural Principles Written Especially for Pastors of the Lutheran Church*, John H.C. Fritz, CPH, 1945.

“That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture,” *Luther's Works*, Volume 39, Church and Ministry, pages 301-314, Fortress Press, 1970.

*Studies in the Lutheran Confessions*, Willard Dow Allbeck, Fortress, 1968.

*The Holy Bible: New International Version*, Zondervan, 1984.

*The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, R.C.H. Lenski, Augsburg, 1944.

*The Shepherd Under Christ*, Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, NPH, 1974.

*What Luther Says: An Anthology*, compiled by Ewald M. Plass, CPH, 1959.