

Brothers in Ministry Arrange for Congregational Health

Looking for a Prescription for Healthy Change

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His report to his brothers in ministry begins, “Moreover, the conditions in the congregations are pitiful.”

Could the situation be more abysmal in the parishes of the church that he describes? He claims that the people “learn nothing, know nothing, never pray, do nothing but abuse their liberty.” There’s a total decay in Christian knowledge among the people. Their faith is atrophying from lack of exercise. No one is praying. Confession of sin is ignored. Holy Communion is despised.

How unhealthy are the parishes that his report describes? They are comprised of people grossly ignorant of doctrine and totally unwilling to get into God’s Word. Could there be a strain of congregational disease that could be any more resistant to healing than this syndrome (since it refuses the cure found only in the Means of Grace)?

His report doesn’t have anything better to say about the clergy. What has he found? Clergy addicted to alcohol (and some even running taverns on the side). In addition to mentioning some gross examples of the moral corruption among the clergy, he cites one highly regarded minister who can’t even recite the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed fluently. That might not be the norm but he does stingingly report, “many pastors are altogether incapable, and incompetent to teach.”

There’s not much good news in his report. The “patient” appears to be on life support. The doctor’s heart aches with pain at the severity of the patient’s sickness! How totally unhealthy are the conditions in the church! The church seems beyond sick, it sounds like it is time for hospice care. But instead of letting the “patient” die comfortably, this doctor will offer a real prescription for a cure.

Just whose assessment of the sickness afflicting the church is this? Some self-proclaimed church health “expert” who is churning out endless books offering 12 points to a cure? No! A synod official or Parish Assistant consultant? Absolutely not! The author of this harsh assessment of his church body’s severe ailment is none other than Dr. Martin Luther after his “house call” on the churches in Saxony conducted in 1528 and 1529.¹ Dr. Luther’s honest evaluation of the unhealthy situation in Saxony led him to write the Small Catechism which was a major prescription for restoring vitality and health to the local parishes and clergy in Germany.

The Church in every age struggles with some of the same spiritual diseases. The ills facing our synod and its parishes are not so different from the sicknesses in the parishes of the past.² The cure essentially remains the same – using the Means of Grace – to get the church back to health and to keep it living and growing in a spiritually healthy lifestyle. This may sound simplistic, but it is anything but simple to get God’s people to seek healing in God’s Word and to see the church as essentially a hospital for sin-sick sinners who need the same medicine week after week. There is nothing simple about carefully prescribing the proper doses of radioactive law and healing gospel in our ministry. This is the art of the spiritual medical practice which the pastor, as physician for the soul, never stops looking to perfect.

¹ See Bente’s *Historical Introduction* in *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 67-69 for a more detailed explanation of Luther’s Saxon Visitation and his response.

² Perhaps considering the description that Luther gives of his day might make us feel better about the challenges facing the church today. I doubt anyone could offer quite as harsh an assessment of the church’s ills today as what he describes for his Saxon Visitation in terms of the apathy of the people and lack of piety among the clergy.

ONLY AN HONEST ASSESSMENT LEADS TO PROPER DIAGNOSIS

Proper diagnosis begins with honest assessment. In medicine, a doctor begins with a series of tests that measure everything from blood pressure to heart rate before offering a prescription for health. Such an examination of the church is difficult. What tests can we administer? Sometimes you know “unhealthy” when you see it. But examining the church solely with subjective measurements can be difficult and dangerous, as a subjective analysis might prove false. We dare not forget our Savior’s statement of comfort given to a sick-looking church at Smyrna – “I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich!” (Rev 2:9) and the trouble-tested church at Philadelphia – “I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and not denied my name” (Rev 3:8). Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, there may be a form of spiritual health where we would perceive only sickness. But we don’t look for true spiritual health apart from the regular use of the Means of Grace. Even if a congregation looks healthy and prosperous, appearances may be deceiving if the dependence on and regular use of Means of Grace ministry is lacking. Remember our Savior’s warning to the church at Ephesus, which had reason to be proud of its rich history, “Yet this I have against you, you have lost your first love.” (Rev 2:4). Our “first love,” born out of the tribulation of the Lutheran Reformation, is justification by grace alone clearly proclaimed in Word and profitably received in the pure administration of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Although we accept that there may be more art than science to any church diagnosis, if people aren’t using the Means of Grace, we know that despite any external appearances the church can’t be called “healthy.” This is why we reject as incomplete many of the tests and indicators proffered by those who claim to be “experts” at the diagnosis of church health.³

God is concerned more about the strength of our heart than merely the appearance of our health. The great Physician sees our hearts, while we can see externals only. For this reason a congregation can be like the fellow who appears healthy but whose heart is a ticking time bomb because of multiple clogged arteries.

The tricky question remains: How does one measure health or sickness in a parish? With what stethoscope can we hear the heart of the church beating faintly or strongly (since God is concerned more about our heart than any façade that we might be able to maintain)? Believing that “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sa 16:7) doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t look at the outward appearance; after all that is all that God’s given us the ability to do. Plus we know that “every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit” (Mt 7:17). A faint heartbeat shows itself in a lack of spiritual stamina, and can still be measured in certain ways.

Although statistics are a good place to begin looking for “fruit” produced by the gospel, I’d caution that statistics are not an end in and of themselves. How can it be denied, however, that the statistics of our age don’t indicate some problems? According to the 2008 WELS statistical report, we were down in membership again this past year. We claimed 389,364 souls and 308,430 communicants (a loss of 4,877 in total souls and a loss of 2,853 from 2007 in communicants). This continues the downward pattern of the past decade. The numbers are sobering. Since 1998, over 110 WELS missions and congregations have closed or merged into extinction. More likely will close while few will open because of financial challenges in our synod.

Not only is membership in decline, so is weekly worship attendance. In 1990, the weekly WELS average worship attendance was 192,999 (45.8% of souls). Today it has dropped to 167,816 (43.1%). Think about what that means. Now there are 25,183 fewer people receiving the Means of Grace each week in worship than there were in 1990 (and the total annual percentage of those in worship has slipped by over 2 ½ %). That cannot be an indicator of improving health or vitality.

³ Note that this does not mean that we avoid using any measurement tools that have been carefully developed to diagnose spiritual issues in our parishes. There are many instruments that have been developed which could prove useful and insightful (e.g. WELS Parish Assistance uses many different ones that they have fine-tuned). However, we do so with the awareness of the inherent limitations of any such measurement tool.

Our Lutheran elementary schools also are experiencing challenges as evidenced by a 16.5% decline in enrollment over the past ten years (29,943 in the 1999-2000 school year to 25,289 in 2008-2009 school year). The same is true of our preparatory schools which have experienced a 43% decline in enrollment (from 928 students in 1999-2000 to 529 in 2008-2009). Although some may suggest that the pool of American students is dwindling, it is interesting to note that the enrollment in our area Lutheran high schools has grown slightly (a 3% increase since the 1999-2000 school year) and our Early Childhood Ministries have exploded with a 47% increase in growth (from 5,247 children enrolled in 1999-2000 to 9,823 in 2008-2009).⁴ Although some might wonder how to evaluate these trends, of even greater concern is the declining percentage of those students from our own WELS families who are enrolled in our WELS school system. The percentage of our own members' children attending our schools has dropped from 82% in 1998-99 to 62% in the 2008-09 school year.⁵ With the challenges of our current economy, doesn't it sadden you to hear of schools closing and to see the growing list of schools releasing faithful men and women from their calls because of declining enrollment and cutbacks?

Statistics compiled by the synod show that only 23% of our congregations have grown numerically (by one or more individuals) in worship attendance each year over the last ten years (and of those only 76 [6%] of WELS congregations experienced a weekly worship attendance increase of more than five individuals each year for each of the past ten years); 28% of our congregations have stayed the same numerically (with an increase or decrease of less than one individual in worship) over the past ten years; 45% have experienced numerical decline (a decrease of one or more individuals in worship each year over the past ten years); and 3% have either incomplete or insufficient data (or are new starts).⁶

Declining strength is not just a phenomenon of the synod we serve and love. Listen to research from Strategic Renewal Internationals that reveals some disturbing trends in the broad American church scene:

- Church attendance has decreased by 9.5 percent in the last ten years, while the population has increased by 11.4 percent.
- As many as 85% of churches have plateaued or are declining.
- Over the past fifteen years \$500 billion has been spent on ministry, with no appreciable growth in the impact of the church.⁷

According to Preaching NOW, on any given weekend, only 20% of Americans attend church, and that percentage is expected to be cut in half by 2050. Less than 15% of U.S. churches are growing, and they claim that less than 1% are growing because of evangelism.⁸ If "misery loves company," we're in good company in the same hospital ward with the rest of American churches.

Even though it is difficult to objectively measure and test the heart of this "patient," can anyone doubt that there is a real sickness that needs real treatment? Measuring the connection that people have to Word and Sacrament is a fair way to measure our potential for health. If people are avoiding the Means of Grace, there can be no hope for health among us. Despite the potential for a façade of health to exist, that is why Bible class attendance, worship attendance, and membership are good indicators of potential health.

Unhealthy spiritual conditions may be hard to diagnose at first because they are a matter of the heart. When spiritual sickness flows from the heart into the life of a congregation, it is easy to see it presenting itself in such sins as resisting Biblical instruction, avoiding worship, not sharing the faith, backbiting, gossiping, laziness, etc.

⁴ Could this rapid growth in our Early Childhood Ministries be attributed to the fact that these ministries are more often designed for outreach and more oriented towards reaching beyond their congregational members and targeting the community?

⁵ I thank the Commission on Parish Schools for supplying me with this information when I requested it.

⁶ These statistics were prepared by the former administrator of WELS Parish Services and dated June 10, 2009. For the detailed chart demonstrating the breakdown, see *Appendix A*

⁷ Cousins, Don: *Experiencing LeaderShift*, p. 151

⁸ Nelson from an email from PreachingNOW <PreachingNOW@preachingmagazine-info.com>

STEPS TOWARD A PROPER DIAGNOSIS

Despite the sickness in the church, we have many Lutheran heritage treasures to celebrate and apply to the issue of our current diagnosis and treatment.

What a blessing for us to understand and to appreciate the theology of the cross! There is a clear difference in the way that you and I approach this issue from those in the Evangelical world (and many of the church health “gurus”). We treasure the blessed heritage of what Martin Luther discovered in his theology of the cross. It is sad that many of our brothers and sisters in the rest of Christendom facing these challenges don’t appreciate that truth. We live under the cross. It is an empty cross because of our Savior’s completed work, but there is still a cross in our life. Although we rejoice to see health and vitality in the church, we reject a theology of glory that expects all the glory here, now, and always. We accept with joy the blessings of health when they are apparent and we don’t despair when our faithful use of the Means of Grace doesn’t appear to produce “health.” This truth shapes our expectations of what health looks like and how we accomplish it.

However, this doesn’t mean that we raise our arms in delightful bliss at the spiritual mess that we find in our world, exclaiming, “That’s just what I expected – failure and hardship!” We appreciate our Savior’s implicit call to hard work under the sun of the cross in his admonition, “As long as it is day, we [Note: the plural spoken to his disciples] must do the work of him who sent me” (Jn 9:4). We may long for the “night” of heavenly bliss and peace when we can rest from our labors, but there is much hard labor to accomplish while it is “day.” The theology of the cross helps us avoid a man-centered theology which blames ourselves when the Means of Grace don’t appear to achieve glory while laboring in the Church Militant. We delight in the Means of Grace. No amount of activity can be a substitute for that. We trust in the gospel’s power to accomplish the purposes that God intends. The gospel works and we seek to reflect this truth in humble service, and confident preaching, teaching, and witnessing.

We treasure the truth of an external call into the public ministry from a local congregation and the reality of our unique giftedness. Our “calling” isn’t a warm fuzzy feeling that quickly fades in the challenges of frustrating ministry. What comfort in knowing that despite our apprehensions and failings, like St. Paul, each of us in public ministry can find comfort in claiming, “I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach” (Eph 3:7-8). We celebrate the truth that Christ gives a wide variety of gifts to those who are called into the public ministry and to each congregation. We respect that everyone brings different gifts to the table. I treasure my associate at Risen Savior (who is ten years my junior), Pastor Seth Haakenson, because we are distinctly different, not because he is a cookie-cutter image of me. Year after year, I grow more appreciative of him because he isn’t just like me. His insights and approaches complement mine. A good team ministry is a marriage of diverse gifts brought together to carry out united ministry. God didn’t give out bland and generic gift packages to those who serve him. He is too wise and loving to do so.⁹ Celebrating this truth will help us avoid ministerial jealousy and prevent us from despairing when we admit our weaknesses. After all, as St. Paul said, “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God” (2 Cor 3:5). You and I cannot walk away from the challenges set before us. We have reason to believe that God will work through our feeble efforts¹⁰ and bless the faithful use of our giftedness.

We treasure the heritage of understanding the proper Biblical distinction between law and gospel in the light of grace alone! Sin calls for repentance and grace covers a multitude of sins. In the examination of the church, there is stinging diagnosis of law which we need to accept, and cannot dodge, if we are to be restored to health. The law which diagnoses our problem (but never heals it) tastes terrible and the gospel which brings healing always tastes sweet. But without the law’s honest assessment, how can the gospel bring proper salve to our sickness?

⁹ Cf. 1 Pt 4:10-11, Eph 4:7

¹⁰ Cf. Paul’s reference to “*treasures in jars of clay*” in 2 Cor 4:1-7.

It is the Bible's teaching about law and gospel that makes assessment and evaluation a joyful task for pastors and congregations. For one thing, the law speaks only to sins, not to growth or methods. The law doesn't call a man a sinner if his congregation fails to grow. A man is a sinner only when he has failed to be faithful, to love, etc. But even when he does sin, the gospel is there to restore and empower change. How can this understanding help foster a climate that welcomes assessment among the clergy of our synod? Do we need to restore an understanding of the blessing of assessment in the light of God's grace? For years, our teachers and principals have undergone annual assessments. Do we, who are pastors, welcome such assessment which can lead to improvement in methods, development of personal growth plans and encouragement for what God is doing through our ministry?

Grace means that I do not have to deny my short comings, to blame others, or to look for scapegoats. Grace brings the power to change hearts and lives in the daily exercise and experience of repentance and forgiveness. This truth speaks to the fearful pastor who is worried that he will be indicted. This truth was echoed to me by Professor Richard Gurgel in an interview:

Why as a Lutheran pastor am I afraid of being evaluated? Is not the work of the gospel motivation for evaluation? If we are 'Sola Gratia' why can't we confess our failings? What am I afraid of if I live out of the gospel? Will the grace of God not cover my weakness? Will the grace of God not see me through my weaknesses and deficiencies?¹¹

Unlike so many others in Christendom, we believe that shame and blame do not produce change. Guilt is designed to lead to either despair or repentance. Repentance is essentially a spiritual change brought about by the working of the Spirit. Change is, therefore, not only possible, but is expected by our Savior and to be accomplished by God (realm of sanctification empowered by grace). Like Luther who directly addressed the spiritual unhealthiness of his day, we see that the status quo is harmful and unacceptable and look to what God wants us to do. There is hope – but not without honest confession of sin and repentance – because the gospel is the power for a God-pleasing change (Ro 1:16-17).

What a blessing to be Christocentric in our approach to church health! While we do not ignore the truth that God gave “my mind and all my abilities,”¹² we believe that our knowledge, skills, and lifestyle, in and of themselves, cannot convert or strengthen anyone. What comfort we have in knowing that the power of the Holy Spirit alone converts! The heart of our ministry is not about us – it is about Christ and sharing the truths of his completed work. I thank Professor Richard Gurgel for helping put this truth into a memorable expression based on a proper understanding of the three articles of the creeds:

To sum it all up: we use First Article gifts to proclaim Second Article truths with Third Article confidence. The gospel and the Means of Grace, the Second and Third articles, stand in magisterial position within the church. The gifts of the First Article stand in ministerial position to the gospel and the means. Whatever those gifts may be that he has given us, they are to be used to the fullest to make sure that the gospel gets out and is heard.¹³

Although this paper may at times focus on First Article gifts, we dare not lose our focus on those Second and Third Article truths.¹⁴ The Means of Grace are indeed efficacious¹⁵ but there is a difference between that

¹¹ Gurgel, Prof. Richard in an interview.

¹² Luther, *Small Catechism*, Explanation to the First Article.

¹³ Gurgel, Prof. Richard: “*Fan into Flame (Your Faith and) the Gift of God!: A Call to Grow for Brothers and Sisters in the Public Ministry.*” Keynote Address at WELS Southeastern Wisconsin District Conference 2009, p. 12

¹⁴ That doesn't mean that I think that the Means of Grace are perfectly understood and used among us – far from it. Much of the problem of congregational health is directly related to the Means of Grace, while much can also be blamed on the improper stewardship of spiritual gifts. Parish Consultant, Rev. Paul Kelm, wrote in an email on May 20, 2009 sent to the authors of the church health symposium papers, an insightful comment which may be helpful to consider:

A third big health issue is the level of spiritual maturity in our congregations. Parish Assistance has been using a “belief survey” with congregations for several years. It is discouraging to see the percentages of active members who confuse law

and the relative effectiveness¹⁶ and efficiency^{17 18} of any methodology which attempts to proclaim the gospel. We seek to remove the barriers that we have placed in the path of the gospel. We must reject the notion that says “All we need to do is preach the gospel...”¹⁹ if such a thought flows from the sinful nature which attempts to use this as an excuse for poor planning, laziness and a lack of accountability. Consider Prof. Armin Schuetze’s affirmation of this truth:

We must learn the practical skill of pleading the cause of the Gospel most effectively. The fact that the Gospel is the power of God, that through it the Holy Spirit works, that it does not return void, does not free us from the obligation of proclaiming it in the best possible manner. ... This means ... acquiring good homiletical habits, learning good liturgical practices, so that our preaching, our manner of conducting worship services may not put a stumbling block into the way of the Gospel message. So we must acquire the habit or skill of finding the right word to say for a particular circumstance and saying it in the right way.²⁰

He is talking about properly using First Article gifts, proclaiming Second Article truths with Third Article confidence.²¹ So am I.

LOOKING TO DEFINE “HEALTH”

How do you define health? My dictionary defines “health” as “soundness of body.” To heal is “to make whole; to restore health, or to become sound.” Can we define spiritual health as “soundness of Christ’s body – the church on earth”?

Agreeing on a definition of health is difficult. I’ve asked a number of people whom I respect and there doesn’t appear to be a single answer. Consider some definitions that were shared:

“Is our theology aligned with Scripture? Is our mission aligned with our theology? Is our model of ministry biblical? Does the gospel predominate? Are we equipping our people to serve, or are

and gospel, affirm a Reformed theology of the Lord’s Supper, and hedge on salvation alone in Jesus Christ. The secular, postmodern culture around us has eroded doctrinal discernment to a degree I doubt we’ve come to grips with. And people don’t know their Bible – Bible history, theology, or view of life. In fact, this issue – Christian worldview – has become a way of focusing the problem in contemporary Christendom, from George Barna’s research to “*The Truth Project*” launched by *Focus on the Family*. Living out the Christian faith is difficult when there isn’t a clear and consistent understanding of the faith.

What Rev. Kelm seems to be describing here is a problem of our people understanding the Means of Grace. Since only the proper instruction and application of God’s Word can cure what ills he is describing, there is an ongoing call for thorough nurture as our Savior’s command, “*teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*” (Mt 28:20) will continue to need our faithful attention until his return.

¹⁵ That is “having the power to produce a desired effect.”

¹⁶ That is “doing the right things.”

¹⁷ That is “doing the right things in the right way.”

¹⁸ Note: I recognize that the terms “efficacious” and “effective” have been subject to some misunderstanding and controversy in our midst, but I am using them here to express the truths that the gospel alone saves and love calls for us to seek the best ways for sharing that gospel.

¹⁹ If the New Man says “All I need to do is preach the gospel!” – God is praised. If the sinful flesh is saying that, then be very afraid!

²⁰ *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Volume 57, No 4 (October 1960), p. 230. After stressing our confidence in the objective message of reconciliation in part one, this quote is from part two of Prof. Armin Schuetze’s opening service sermon at the seminary. He later says “So your preparation for the ministry of reconciliation involves both: gaining a thorough understanding of its objective basis and acquiring practical skills for it.” and he concludes his sermon: “May He teach us the habits and skills required to plead effectively among sinful men, as St. Paul: ‘We pray in Christ’s stead: be ye reconciled unto God.’ Amen.”

²¹ Too often I fear that we’re dealing with the issue of poor stewardship and a lack of honest confession in the unhealthy ministry settings of today, more than a failure to use and rely on the Means of Grace.

we simply serving them? Are we an outward-looking, others-focused congregation? Do we intentionally strive to gather a larger audience with whom to share God’s saving gospel? Do we rely only on God, through our faithful use of the Means of Grace, to produce the results he desires? Do we understand what must never change, what may change, and what must change?”²²

“We are healthy when we have a focus beyond ourselves. We are not just seeking to take care of ourselves.”²³

“Healthy congregations have a clear sense of purpose and direction. Healthy congregations know why they exist and where they are going.”²⁴

“A healthy congregation is a group of Christians united in the gospel of Jesus Christ, eager to grow inwardly to know Jesus better and better, and eager to help neighbors who don’t know Jesus into the same joy that they know.”²⁵

Each of those definitions touches on a different aspect of the same truth about “soundness” in the body: healthy congregations and pastors are joyfully fulfilling Christ’s mission – both making and nurturing disciples (Mt 28:19-20) by properly using the Means of Grace. Healthy congregations exist both to nurture the flock and reach the lost without neglecting either task – nurture or outreach. Dysfunctional congregations neglect outreach or nurture – or devalue one or the other. Dysfunctional congregations exist more for those who are already in the congregation than those on the outside (pitting nurture against outreach). Dysfunctional congregations do not nurture disciples to be better equipped as “salt and light” in the world (outreach). Dysfunctional congregations make outreach optional rather than the mission of the church which nurture equips God’s people to accomplish. Healthy congregations neither neglect Christ’s call to nurture those who are currently disciples, nor his call to reach out with the gospel that others may come to faith through the Means of Grace. Healthy congregations nurture Christ’s disciples with the goal of outreach. Healthy congregations are outward-focused – both to their fellow believers whom they are called to “build up”²⁶ and to those in the community to whom they are to be “salt and light.”²⁷

In August 1997, when I accepted the call to serve the vacancy at Risen Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church on the northwest side of Milwaukee, we were an all-Caucasian church in a predominately African-American neighborhood that had undergone dramatic change. By the definition of a healthy congregation above, I inherited a congregation that was inherently “sick.” Not that they were not loving and lovely people. The people of Risen Savior were incredibly forgiving and loving toward me and my wife (and thank God they still are, eleven years later). They were almost all life-long Lutherans who knew the Bible probably better than their new pastor (who was stepping into the pulpit of his first parish). But we were “unhealthy” because we weren’t effectively using First Article gifts (for example, despite being a debt-free congregation, there was no outreach committee and little actual outreach being done in the large field around the church known as “North

²² Stroh, Rev. Elton, in an email (dated August 29, 2009) written to this essayist. He defines “congregational health” through a series of questions that help identify relative “health.” The questions make us explore our priorities, attitudes and actions towards our stewardship and use of the Means of Grace. This series of questions also helps to demonstrate how complex and multi-dimensional the issue of congregational health is.

²³ Gurgel, former President Karl in an interview.

²⁴ Becker, Rev. Bruce in an interview.

²⁵ Wendland, Rev. Paul, in an interview.

²⁶ Cf. Eph 4

²⁷ Cf. Mt 5:13-16

Meadows”²⁸) to proclaim Second Article truths with Third Article confidence. It wasn’t a matter of despising the Means of Grace. (Seldom do I think that’s our problem in the spiritual sickness that I see around us in the WELS.) We hadn’t neglected the Means of Grace. A high percentage of the members attended church every Sunday. Most members seemed to have a sound devotional life. Every member came forward each time the Lord’s Supper was offered (and close communion was faithfully practiced). The members received the sacrament in faith. All the members were baptized (and most of them, I think, regularly reflected on those blessings that washed over them). We had every confidence in the gospel but we didn’t understand our First Article gifts. This was a stewardship issue, not a Means of Grace issue. The Word was efficacious. However, we weren’t at all that effective in getting the efficacious Word to our dysfunctional neighborhood. We were inwardly focused. Our church was a fortress of truth in a chaotic neighborhood and we were quite comfortable huddling together in that fortress. We were sick, and few recognized the illness as related to the lack of Great Commission focus.²⁹

We were a little over a hundred and fifty souls strong.³⁰ With 70% of our members over the age of 70 and 70% of our members widows, imagine the sea of bottle-blue grey heads faithfully gracing the pews each Sunday (except the twenty some shut-ins who loved their young pastor’s monthly visits). Our average Sunday worship attendance, which had been gradually declining for over a decade, averaged one hundred and three.³¹ Financially, we were in good shape. Our offerings covered a budget of \$75,000 for at home ministry and about \$25,000 more divided between synod and Wisconsin Lutheran High School.

I was handed blueprints for a proposed expansion (for which we had funding and could start soon) that proposed adding a front driveway so that we could have a drop-off point for the handicapped and elderly (along with handicap-accessible restrooms and a large narthex that could only add to our members’ comfort).³² Did any of this look like we were “unhealthy”? We were very unhealthy, but we would not have noticed this without very careful observation and examination of our purpose and direction through the microscope of the Great Commission. Our focus was clearly on serving ourselves with more gospel. Not that this was done with racist hatred or willful rejection of the Great Commission. This was clearly not intentional. Serving ourselves better seemed the perfectly natural thing to do. Why was this “illness?” We lacked a mindset that treasured anything but trying to preserve the “status quo.” We had no intentional focus on outreach. We had the secret attitude that hoped that we could keep the doors open until Jesus returned or the last coffin of a member was loaded into a hearse. We lacked any realistic and effective plans to share the gospel with our community. We unintentionally gave the impression to our community that we wanted to remain a fortress, rather than an oasis for the community. We were very ill as a congregation and headed towards irrelevancy in our community. But like a person walking around with cancer who still feels few symptoms, we didn’t know how close to death we were.

Ask yourself: Is the story of Risen Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1997 different from the 45% of the WELS churches that are in numerical decline today?

²⁸ “North Meadows” [now renamed “the Woodlands”] has 576 condominium units and was the most densely populated area in the State of Wisconsin. When it began, the condominiums provided starter “homes” for lower middle-class families. It was overwhelmingly occupied by Caucasian families. As those families moved into larger homes in the suburbs, the units began to be renter-occupied by absentee landlords and predominately rented to African-American families. By this time, it was disparagingly called “Ghetto Meadows.”

²⁹ I understand that some congregations may need to get their house “cleaned up” before they can invite “guests.” A Great Commission focus does not neglect nurture of those already in the house.

³⁰ Statistically, the congregation had been in gradual decline since its former peak in communicant membership at 185 with a weekly worship attendance of 176 in 1984.

³¹ In 2009, weekly worship attendance has averaged 260 through August.

³² These initial blue prints sat with the new Planning Committee for three years until new plans evolved that were dramatically different. The first building phase at Risen Savior not only addressed the important issue of handicap accessibility but also increased the capacity of our facility to do ministry that would impact our community and was purely outward focused (by adding 4 classrooms for a school and a gym in addition to a covered drop off and expanded narthex).

“TELL ME LIKE IT IS, DOC! AM I GONNA DIE?”

In our symposium on congregational health, we’ve reviewed some medical histories in the *Biblical Journal of Medicine*. We have seen how God’s people in each age have had to address the problems of poor spiritual health with the law’s scalpel and the gospel’s salve. We have made the patient lie on a hard table, while we’ve poked and prodded, tapped his knee with the hammer of the law, stabbed him with a large syringe till we drew blood, and rubbed a cold stethoscope across his chest. Now the test results are in and the diagnosis of “spiritual sickness” should not shock any of us who’ve been serving this patient for any time. We can’t ignore the problem.

Let’s explore the prescription for restored and renewed health. Trust me -- it will be more than “Take 2 aspirin and call me in the morning!” It is time to agree to a serious plan for treatment. It may be time to swallow some bitter medicine in order to get off life support.

The following prescribed course of action is intended to help move the patient from sickness to health, with the fewest possible side effects. Here is what we are looking to restore:

HEALTHY CONGREGATIONS have

1. Healthy leadership

2. Healthy attitudes

3. Healthy plans

4. Healthy actions,

and can, therefore, expect --

5. Healthy results

1. Looking for a change toward healthier leadership

Jesus said it – “A student is not about his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Lk 6:40). My District President put it succinctly – “Congregations eventually reflect their pastors.”³³ We don’t like to admit it, but the most severe challenges associated with poor spiritual health in our parishes can often be found in our mirror. As Professor Richard Gurgel reminded me, “Rarely if ever can a congregation exceed the spiritual health of its pastor. If I have lost my joy and delight for the gospel, my people aren’t far behind. That is why it is critical that I am growing. Isn’t that why the Apostle Paul so strongly urged Timothy to watch his life and doctrine closely so that, through life and teaching that clearly proclaimed Christ, God would keep secure his own salvation and the salvation of his hearers?”³⁴

I don’t want to sucker punch you when you’re already hunched over. When I look in the mirror, I see a guy who can feel pretty humbled by his inadequacies. From my perspective, we who serve in the public ministry are pretty battered and bruised these days. Ministry is tough and doesn’t seem to get any easier with each passing year. In a survey among LC-MS clergy, the researchers discovered that 20% of the pastors in the pulpit were “severely depressed, highly distressed and experiencing advanced stages of burnout,” and an additional 20% were “moderately distressed and are approaching burnout.”³⁵ I can’t get out of my head the comment of a brother who was no longer in the parish ministry who said to me, “I just couldn’t do what you do any more. I am glad that I am out.”

Apparently, he’s not alone. Focus on the Family estimates that approximately 1,500 pastors leave their assignments each month, because of moral failure, spiritual burnout or contention within their local congregations. A national survey indicates that 80% of pastors and 84% of their spouses are discouraged or are dealing with depression. In this national survey, more than 40% of pastors and 47% of their spouses report that

³³ Rutschow, Rev. David in an interview.

³⁴ Gurgel, Prof. Richard in an interview.

³⁵ From a self-study commissioned by LC-MS Board for Higher Education in 1999, titled “Clergy Shortage Study.”

they are suffering from burnout, frantic schedules and unrealistic expectations. Eighty percent of the clergy feel their families have been negatively impacted by the church.³⁶ Is this true only of other denominations? Can we simply dismiss these figures from others? Or could many of these same feelings also permeate the ministerium of the WELS?

Who can deny that pastors are “ill” themselves -- physically, emotionally and spiritually? The problem of pastors’ physical unhealthiness has become critical. In 2004, a survey of 2,500 ministers by Pulpit and Pew, based at Duke University, found 76% of Christian clergy were overweight, compared with 61% of the general population.³⁷ We can’t afford to ignore the issues of diet and exercise. We sit too much. We live with too much stress not to exercise. Do you know that studies have demonstrated that exercise not only lowers blood pressure, cholesterol, risk of colon cancer and increases oxygen capacity, but it also decreases depression and anxiety?³⁸ Finding time for moderate weight training and cardiovascular exercise three times a week in a busy schedule isn’t easy. But I’ve felt the loss from not being able to release tensions when I try to give it up in a busy week. Besides, working out at the local gym is a great way to meet people in the community. Just ask Gus Harris, a huge, muscular African-American who is a gentle giant, and his wife, Billie, who now commune at our altar. I would never have met Gus if I hadn’t gone to the gym.

We who serve others can’t neglect to serve ourselves both emotionally and psychologically. Not so long ago my cell phone rang: “I am sorry that it has taken so long for me to call you back. I just want you to know why I am out of the public ministry. My wife left me. I lost my ministry and all because I was addicted to pornography. But I want you to know that for the first time in my life I am free from its addiction. I have gone through extensive therapy. I am so very happy to be free.”³⁹ I couldn’t help but remember how beloved he was by his congregation. If only, I thought, he could have dealt with this earlier. If you need to talk to a therapist or counselor (and most of us do need to do so more than we would ever be willing to admit), please do so. We pastors can’t ignore our emotional and psychological needs.⁴⁰ The tragedy of depression (which seems to plague our profession) is that it causes us to be withdrawn, isolate ourselves and to become irritable when healthy ministry calls for just the opposite. Help is available but not if we don’t reach out for it.

Perhaps the most shocking reality is that all of us need more spiritual help than we’d ever admit. Decide for yourself if you think August Pieper’s comments are still relevant:

[The pastor] needs much more of God’s Word for his soul than does an ordinary Christian because he is tempted much more. Doubt of the truth, weariness in ministry and depression, despair and fear, pride and a domineering spirit, men-service and hypocrisy, laziness, lust, greed, and worldly pleasure plague him more than ordinary Christians. More than anyone, he needs daily strengthening through doctrine, comfort, power, upbuilding, encouragement, and warning, so that his light is not extinguished in the darkness, so that he does not preach to others and himself be rejected.⁴¹

If Christ carved out time for meditation and prayer, how arrogant do I have to be to think I don’t need to do the same? Are you taking time for daily personal Bible study and devotions? I’ve been through some barren times in my ministry when I arrogantly imagined that I just didn’t have time for much more than contact with

³⁶ <http://www.yearofjubilee.org/2008/07/clergy-statistics-and-resources/>

³⁷ George, Denise: *What Pastors Wish Church Members Knew*, p. 47

³⁸ Hayes, Katie: *Working It Out: Using Exercise in Psychotherapy*. p. 6

³⁹ Due to the sensitive nature of this real-life situation, I am withholding personal information. However, the joy of this individual was palpable. Treatment has helped and he hopes to be able to share his story with others one day so that they may avoid his same self-destructive behavior.

⁴⁰ Much could also be discussed in connection with this about the importance of confidentiality and the spiritual benefits of private confession with one another in the clergy.

⁴¹ Pieper, August: “Scripture as the Special Task of the Pastor,” *Wauwatosa Theology*, page 122-123

God's Word in shabby sermon preparation. Shame on me! (And shame on you, too!) Praise God for the grace of a Savior who hasn't long ago cast me aside and chosen someone else to carry out his work at Risen Savior!

How can we expect to model healthy leadership if we aren't healthy ourselves? Perhaps that assumes too much. Do you even see yourself as a leader? Once, while serving as an associate consultant on a Parish Assistance project, I was surprised when the local pastor of the church told me, "I don't see myself as a leader." This summer I was less surprised when a seminary professor told me privately, "Young guys are not sure they are equipped to be leaders. They're overwhelmed by the challenge and don't know where to start."

But even if you think, as 92% of American clergy believe,⁴² that you lack the spiritual gift of leadership (Ro 12:8) – if you are a pastor, you are a leader. As one professor told me, "The first task of a leader is to collaborate with followers and pick a direction. Be a leader." We can lead with the gifts that God has individually given to each of us. Here's the point – leaders don't do it all alone as they focus on Great Commission ministry which God has given to his people. As seminary President Wendland remarked, "The most important factor, next to the gospel, of improving the health of our congregations is a pastor who is willing to work with local leaders to understand and implement the gospel mission that we've been given."⁴³

Someone put it this way, "The congregation has to give the pastor authority. The pastor has to give the congregation ministry." Former Synod President Gurgel reminded me that "Healthy leadership is when a pastor is given the ability to lead."⁴⁴ I appreciated when it was put this way – "A congregation handles authority by creating boards that govern, pastors that lead, staffs that manage, and congregations that actually do ministry."⁴⁵ This calls for councilmen to provide oversight leadership as they govern the church and insure that the church is carrying out its Great Commission ministry. The council does not need to micromanage the affairs of the church and the work of Christ's people. They are to lead together with the pastor.

How healthy is the local leadership in your parishes? I recall the days in our early council meetings when we reviewed every ministry expense down to the cost of paperclips (at least it felt that way!). Even what was in the budget seemed to need re-approval. Meetings were lengthy and exhausting affairs which focused on money rather than ministry. Those days are long gone. Our meetings still can go too long but I rarely come home exhausted and frustrated after them. Why? Our focus shifted from looking to manage all the details of our ministry to spiritual oversight of our outreach-focused ministry; from a money-focused affair to a ministry-minded celebration; from a battleground for personal agendas into a place to rejoice in God's gifts; from a tower from which to exercise control to an oasis where those who serve find encouragement for ministry.

This didn't happen overnight and it is never perfect. But it happened when we united in our mission and began to actively work together to achieve a common goal.⁴⁶ The members let me lead when we began to grasp why God had us at 9550 West Brown Deer Road and what he wanted us together to do. I will never forget when I knew that our situation had changed. I came to the council meeting and asked about the idea of starting Hispanic outreach with a seminary student who spoke fluent Spanish. I explained the issue of an influx of Spanish-speaking people in our neighborhood and my lack of Spanish skills. However, we had no money in the

⁴² Cousins, Don: *Experiencing LeaderShift*, p. 19-20 (quoted from a George Barna survey) Note: the studies indicate that most clergy feel that they lack the spiritual gift of leadership (Ro 12:8). The good news is that even though some leadership skills are not transferrable (e.g. the ideal charismatic leader) that doesn't mean that those without that special spiritual gift cannot still lead effectively by functioning as equipping leaders. Cousins covers this thought on pages 22-42 in detail. He reminds us that God has distributed his gifts properly and we need to stop beating ourselves up for who we are not. He says, "We need to stop doing the work of ten people and focus instead on equipping ten people to do the work." (p. 41).

⁴³ Wendland, President Paul in an interview.

⁴⁴ Gurgel, Rev. Karl in an interview.

⁴⁵ Borden, Paul: *Direct Hit*, p. 77

⁴⁶ Much of this began with the study of leadership and the mission of the church in council meetings using the *Lutheran Leadership Series* (Five 6-lesson Bible Classes) produced by Parish Services; attendance at a *School of Outreach* (which led to an active Outreach Committee); the study of the book *Change: Mission & Ministry Across Cultures* (by E. Allen Sorum and his personal mentoring) by a long-range planning committee (which led to a written report and outreach attitudes formed over several years of study); leadership, mentoring and advice from many outside sources; and a series of well-attended cottage meetings in 1999 to develop and establish a five-year "vision" for the congregation.

budget (or reserves to start this) because we just finished a building phase. I gave them every reasonable excuse that could lead them to reject this proposal. And with one united voice, they voted to start it anyway because the Great Commission need outweighed all the other concerns. The gospel compelled them to start Hispanic Ministry. I remember coming home and telling my wife how pleased I was that I didn't need to convince and persuade them. They "persuaded" me. Why? They were governing from the Great Commission. I knew that we had moved from sickness to health when those who held the power, controlled the turf and directed the money were willing to focus energy on those who are not yet a part of the congregation.

After some restructuring, today our governance board, which we call by another name, provides leadership and spiritual governance. They focus on the mission of the church. They don't even get detailed monthly financial reports on the school or parish's separate budgets. Those are reviewed by other boards. They don't even go line-by-line though the proposed budgets. We do use a professional auditing and accounting firm to insure accountability and management controls. Budgets develop from the people who are doing ministry (e.g. the Outreach Committee develops its own annual plans and submits a request to the parish board's budget committee). The focus is on mission, not nickels. For that matter, our voters' assembly hasn't seen our individual called workers salaries in years. The boards that develop them do and the voters sometimes ask – "Are we at least paying synod code?" "Yes."

Changing from a traditional model of the pastor doing the ministry (and being managed by the voters or council) to the pastor leading the equipping of others to do ministry remains a challenge for most churches.⁴⁷ One brother in the ministry often speaks of his challenge in moving from being a "shepherd" (who is able to personally minister to every member of his flock one-to-one) to a "rancher" (who oversees the ministry and equips others to do the primary shepherding) as his ministry grew.⁴⁸ Isn't the goal of a healthy ministry to let members claim active roles in congregation's ministry of the Word according to their spiritual gifts and passion so that they build up one another?⁴⁹ Therefore, we seek to avoid micromanaging the congregation's ministry. We look to avoid any appearance that the pastor (or boards or councils) must "control" every aspect of ministry (while at the same time not abdicating the important spiritual and doctrinal oversight to which the pastor has been called as overseer). Could the challenge of moving from being a "shepherd" to a "rancher" be a factor in a familiar pattern in which many of our mission congregations struggle to grow past the stage where a pastor can reasonably minister one-on-one to the members (while still actively working to reach out to the lost)?

Although I think the following abuse is a rarity, there are those who see their ministry as a means to gain personal significance. These types gain personal significance more from control than from leading and serving. If ideally the laity turns over leadership to the pastor, the pastor equips and unleashes the people to carry out their personal ministry. An insecure pastor does not handle this well. Ministry in this tragic situation becomes about submitting to a pastor's "spiritual" sounding rhetoric which is more about building a personal empire and getting his way than the health and growth of the congregation. This can lead only to dysfunction.

It is time for some good news -- not every congregation of the WELS is wasting away under unhealthy leadership or suffering numerical decline. Some are flourishing while others have made significant measurable turn-arounds. Give God the credit! In November 2008, a WELS Leadership Forum was convened in Milwaukee through a grant awarded Parish Services to explore core characteristics that could be seen in numerically growing congregations in the WELS. The criterion for participation in the study was that congregations had grown by a minimum of ten more people in worship for each of the last ten years. So a church which averaged 200 people in worship each Sunday in 1997 needed to be worshipping at least 300 each Sunday in 2007. Thirty-four WELS congregations met that requirement and 31 sent pastors, key staff and local leaders to the gathering. Obviously, there are more than 34 healthy congregations in WELS and more than 34

⁴⁷ How much of this has to do with our synodical cultural heritage and historical models of ministry? One of my brothers in the ministry has told me repeatedly that he is convinced that we value "authority" in ministry, much more than "accountability" of ministry.

⁴⁸ Note: a "rancher" is always still a "shepherd" but as his flock grows he must appoint more under-shepherds who assist him. I am not implying that you are either a "shepherd" or a "rancher."

⁴⁹ Cf. Eph 4, Ro 12 and 1 Cor 12.

healthy leaders. But the gathering brought together an interesting cross section of God’s people. What amazed me in that conference was the incredible diversity of the giftedness in that room! There was nothing like lock-step conformity in practice or approach to ministry. There was a positive excitement for ministry. God gave these healthy-appearing congregations and their leaders many different forms of ministry, locations (from suburban to urban), congregational sizes (from small to super-sized), organizational structures, varied youth and adult programs, and even approaches to worship (from what some would call “contemporary” to “traditional”).⁵⁰ However, consider how two key findings colored almost all of the twelve characteristics that these thirty churches shared in common: 1) a firm commitment to outreach and 2) strong leadership. Notice the coloring of outreach in the first three characteristics which were the core points that they shared in common:

- Excellence in worship and relevance in preaching.
- Warm, caring, inviting, relational atmosphere.
- Priority on outreach, with intentional strategies.⁵¹

Again see the importance of competent and healthy leadership being central to the third set of their twelve shared characteristics that were discovered:

- Strong, long-term pastoral leadership.
- Empowered and equipped lay leadership.
- Flexible, entrepreneurial, and permission-giving congregational climate.
- United staff with shared philosophy of ministry.⁵²

It is no wonder that leadership is such hard work.⁵³ According to Rev. Wayne Mueller, “Hard work is the key element to leadership – preparing better Bible classes, more variety to Bible classes, and better sermons. You can be dumb and a poor preacher but your congregation will learn to love you if you work hard.”⁵⁴ I tend to agree with him – mostly from the personal experience of not being so bright.

More than ever we need healthier leadership from local leaders and pastors. The key is working at the right things. Often it is an issue of efficiency verses effectiveness. We waste time doing things that aren’t that important. I don’t believe that our clergy rosters are riddled with lazy pastors. But institutional busyness and “administrivia”⁵⁵ dominate far too many clergy calendars (including mine). We need to address the problem of our cluttered schedules. We send too many emails. We spend too much time in front of a computer. We invest too little time mentoring others for leadership. And we make far too few calls on the unchurched. I don’t think we’re lazy. I think we’re crazy for doing some of the things we do (which enable dysfunction, rather than heal the church). Change toward healthier leadership grows by doing the most important things right, for the right reason!

2. Looking for changes towards healthier attitudes

⁵⁰ This reminds me of those who feel that all the church needs to do in order to grow is have “contemporary” worship (however you care to define that term) when in my experience the worship-style of a church has little to do with the issue of excellence in worship and relevance in the proclamation of the gospel. Worship on any spectrum from what some people label “contemporary” to “high church” can be poorly done. Neither does worship make evangelism calls. Despite the varied forms of worship-style represented in that room, there was excellence in worship in the variety of forms among those who gathered in Milwaukee.

⁵¹ See Appendix B for the entire list.

⁵² For the entire list see Appendix B.

⁵³ Consider St. Paul’s own description of his work-ethic in places like 1 Cor 4:12, 2 Cor 6:4-5, and 1Thes 5:12.

⁵⁴ Mueller, Rev. Wayne in an interview.

⁵⁵ “Administrivia” can be defined as trivia matters of administration that could (and should) be done by someone else.

Faces once downcast glowed with joy only moments later for the Emmaus disciples (Lk 24:13-35). Heavy feet that trudged towards Emmaus sprinted back to Jerusalem with a joy-filled pace. What changed? Nothing and everything! The facts hadn't changed but their perceptions of them had. When the truth came into focus of the resurrection's reality – their attitudes were transformed in an instant.

I contend that most of the church walks like the Emmaus disciples leaving Jerusalem. How do we move from downcast malaise to joyful hope in our ministry? It begins with our attitude. We must be like Joshua and Caleb happily seeing “a land flowing with milk and honey” even while everyone else just notices the giants. This is not to deny the challenges that we face, nor to forget the God that we serve. Recognizing Christ's continual presence among us helps us share with our members a resurrection hope that tints all that we see.

You can't ignore congregational attitudes and moods. People claim that they can sense a church's tone and attitude within moments of walking through the door. The pastor plays an important role in being a spark plug but every member needs to fire on the proper cylinder. I thank God for the positive resurrection spirit that I meet in the faces of the people that I serve. All the time visitors tell me how positive they feel people act towards them. Attitudes are shaped, not by changing all the facts associated with one's ministry setting, but seeing Christ's presence in them. No matter how powerful our adversaries, we remember “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them” (2 Kgs 6:15-16).

Attitude isn't everything. But it is vitally important to achieving healthier ministries. Sometimes we just have to sit down and take a thoughtful inventory of what we have. I recall an early experience with our Planning Committee and its first S.W.O.T. analysis.⁵⁶ After we worked through our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, we found many more strengths than we imagined. (It didn't surprise me because I had carefully thought through this exercise in advance.) The mood began to change – “It is not as bad as we think.” “No, God can accomplish more than we think or imagine. We have strengths upon which to build.”

Leaders work to shape healthier attitudes by preaching with optimism and confidence regardless of our earthly circumstances. This is not pleasant Pollyannaism which ignores ministry realities. But it is joyful passion born of resurrection truth and our Great Commission calling. Think of the contagious optimism St. Paul conveys even while writing from prison.

When the leaders of the healthy-appearing congregations that gathered at the WELS Leadership Forum commented in their parting thoughts about what they shared in common with such diverse ministries, they placed attitude in a primary position. Here are the expressions about attitude which they recognized in healthy and growing ministries: “gospel joy, urgency for the mission of the kingdom – souls!, humility in attitude, positive attitude about God's work, positive in your community (serving spirit), zeal or passion for ministry, enthusiasm/drive, ‘can do’ mind-set, ‘go for it’ spirit, passion to serve/share the gospel, and energetic in their mission.”⁵⁷

This doesn't mean that those with a healthy attitude never fail – every Joshua has his Ai – but fear of failure doesn't change their course of action. An important aspect about a healthy attitude is being able to be self-critical. They are able to examine what failed without looking to assign blame. After all, how can we learn if we don't evaluate how we can improve? But they avoid endless navel-gazing. Healthy churches develop systems of accountability. Those that are unhealthy direct criticism towards the leadership or look for a scapegoat while avoiding the acceptance of any responsibility. (When this unhealthy approach begins to dominate a congregation, leaders fear criticism and move away from what is best to what is familiar and safe – even if it didn't work.). As George Barna warns, “Stalwarts in a dying church often argue that things will return to normal if the church can do a better job of doing what it has always done.”⁵⁸ To measure the ability to be self-critical in your setting, review how the story of your last failure was reported and communicated. We've come to accept failure as a healthy part of doing ministry. If we're not failing, we're probably not doing enough.

⁵⁶ S.W.O.T. stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

⁵⁷ Document: *WELS Leadership Forum: Parting Thoughts* (dated November 18, 2008) p. 2

⁵⁸ Barna, George: *Turn Around Churches*, p. 37

A healthy attitude that fosters self-criticism will lead one to seek constructive criticism from others outside your congregational setting often through formal assessment and invitations to train your leadership. Please understand that I don't like my doctor to examine me any more than the next guy. But unless I am willing to walk into the doctor's office and be stripped down to my shorts and examined with his pointy finger, there is no other way to evaluate my true health. The healthy stay healthy by letting the doctor do a little poking and prodding now and then. This reminds me of what a brother recently told me: "Most people flee from a real exercise of brotherly admonition like a bat from daylight."⁵⁹ Is this fear of constructive criticism what keeps many from asking for help from a brother, engaging Parish Assistance, attending a School of Worship Enrichment, or organizing for a School of Outreach? Although such events can worry even the most self-assured clergyman of what he might look like with his pants down, I have found the most positive changes in our ministry setting come from the shared experiences, wisdom and insights from consultants. Brothers like E. Allen Sorum, Jim Huebner, Mike Hintz and a host of others have been tremendous blessings in our ministry. I still credit the simple plans that flowed out of the first School of Outreach that we attended for kindling a fire for evangelism that still burns brightly in our midst.

I fear that too often our WELS culture rushes to a conclusion of suspicion about the "success" of another's ministry rather than seeking his input and assistance in our own ministry challenges. When we began to explore an after-school program for inner city youth, we sent a delegation to examine the most successful programs that were like what we envisioned.

Finally, flexibility was a key attitude that was shared by those leaders at the WELS Leadership Forum. Here's how that healthy attitude was described by those participants: "not afraid of change, risk takers, willingness to try new ideas, openness to learn from others, willingness to learn from leaders outside the WELS, willingness to fail, willingness to adapt, willingness to take risks to advance the gospel, a willingness to make hard decisions – relocate, release a worker, borrow, etc., they figure out what works for their congregation and do it versus some prescribed program, willingness to adapt worship style to their community,⁶⁰ try many things, understanding that unity can exist without uniformity of methodology, open to challenges and open to conflict resolution."⁶¹

Changing the course of a congregation takes time. This calls for evangelical patience. Rev. Wayne Mueller, who himself has been in several difficult church situations that needed restored health, assured me, "I have never had significant measurable change in less than 2 ½ years of ministry."⁶² If we want the church to become healthy, we must wait patiently like the farmer waits for God to make his crops grow. Even after our congregation went through its first long-range planning process (a "visioning" process)⁶³ and passed a resolution that we wanted to be a congregation that reflected the diversity of our community, it took several years and a lot of failed attempts to get our first black male member. Our after-school program that today meets the needs of up to a hundred children a week plugged away for years with only a handful of kids coming each week including many days with only one child attending (until she moved away and we had days with none). Ministry calls for the patient pace-setting attitude of a marathon runner, rather than jack rabbit's hasty and jerky starts and stops. Paul Bordon says, "You can't bring systematic change with no preparation, inadequate prayer, and a lack of leaders committed to the direction in which the pastor wants to take the congregation. Impatience is why many pastors fail."⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Christie, Rev. Aaron in an interview.

⁶⁰ Of course, this does not mean changing the message! Healthy change must always be "for the sake of the gospel." Cf. 1 Cor 9:22-23 for St. Paul's attitude towards adaptation of his methodology to the various circumstances of his ministry.

⁶¹ Document: *WELS Leadership Forum: Parting Thoughts* (dated November 18, 2008) p. 3

⁶² Mueller, Rev. Wayne in an interview.

⁶³ For the purposes of this paper, I am going to be using the word "vision" to describe this process of long-range planning. I am *not* using the term "vision" to describe what only God can see, but as a term that describes the process through which God's people consider how to best use their collective gifts in the future.

⁶⁴ Bordon, Paul: *Direct Hit*, p. 116

3. Looking for changes toward healthier plans

“I planned to visit you.” Paul said to the Corinthians, “When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make plans in a worldly manner?” (2 Cor 1:15, 17). His rhetorical questions called for a “no” answer. Paul’s inspired letters are filled with his godly ministry plans. Of course, not all of his plans came to fruition. But that didn’t stop him from making plans that he asked God to help him complete.

“Planning is a major weakness [in our congregations]. It usually doesn’t extend past the annual budget.”⁶⁵ In a healthy congregation, planning plays an important role. Trying just to keep the status quo isn’t planning for the future, it is more like organizing hospice care. Good planning begins by stepping back to ask critical questions that will help give perspective and provide strategic direction. “The key is ‘Why are we here?’ It seems so simplistic. It is not to build buildings. It is not for stats. It is people.”⁶⁶ First comes an understanding of that mission. Next an envisioning of what God wants us doing to fulfill that mission over the next few years and then developing the specific plans that are consistent with that mission and help make steps towards achieving the vision.

This is the difference between a mission statement and your vision. “Mission [is] ‘what we exist to do’... and vision is ‘what God is calling us to do in the immediate future in this particular place (next year, next three years, or some other period).”⁶⁷ In other words, the mission statement defines a general purpose for the congregation’s existence while the vision statement translates the general purpose into a more specific statement of direction. Vision is not a matter of being able to see the future as much as it is being alert and opening your eyes to see the opportunities that God is presenting in your community and circumstances.

Dying congregations may have a sense of urgency to make “changes.” But there is a strong sense of denial (despite the sense of urgency) and a temptation to make only superficial changes that do not change the substitutive way they are conducting inward-focused ministry. Many try temporary fixes that only delay healthy changes. Borden describes it this way: “In some cases, sadly, the congregation decided to cannibalize itself by selling off property, creating mixed marriages of merger with other dying congregations that only postponed the inevitable, or disguising the situation by renting facilities to other congregations.”⁶⁸ To me, this is just a form of spiritual hospice care. However, pain can help us to have a healthy discontent with the way things are. Vision creates a picture of something better. How else does the doctor get a patient who is unhealthy to change his behaviors, than by creating a sense of urgency through explaining how the bitter medicine will lead to a better cure?

Can the making of Mission Statements and Vision Statements be empty processes that clog a congregation’s calendar only because other congregations are doing it, or because the synod “requires” it or because a few leaders think it is a good idea to give a sense of legitimacy? Yes and such a perfunctory process will only create documents that will gather dust on a shelf in the pastor’s study. It doesn’t have to be this way.⁶⁹ Do you know the story of two stone cutters being interviewed by a reporter? The reporter began each interview by asking, “Tell me what you do.” One stone-cutter answered, “I cut stone.” The second said, “I am building a cathedral.” The second had a clear vision of his purpose. Imagine when the church is filled with those who know how their works fit into God’s plans.

⁶⁵ Rutschow, Rev. David in an interview.

⁶⁶ Gurgel, Rev. Karl in an interview.

⁶⁷ *Studying Congregations*, p.179-180. There is a danger for misunderstanding in the expression – “what God is calling us to do.” We would disagree with how many others use this expression as if God speaks to them apart from the Bible or that the vision which they develop is equivalent to God’s revealed will. We do not believe that God reveals his will to us apart from the Bible. But there is value in wrestling with how the Great Commission (our mission) applies to our current context of ministry and making plans that make best use our parish’s collective First Article gifts. It is in that light, that we develop a vision statement.

⁶⁸ Bordin, Paul: *Direct Hit*, p. 58

⁶⁹ Cf. *Studying Congregations*, p. 183-184 for the characteristics of good vision statements. Note: I would approach this work with due caution.

Like both stone cutters, everyone has a vision -- even if it's not so clear. Every congregation has a vision but only when we get into the Word do we have the correct vision. Every member has an image (a vision, if you will) of what the congregation should do, but only when that is guided by the Word do we have a correct vision. And only when we go through a process together do we have a shared vision of what God wants. That's the blessing of the entire congregation walking through the process of vision setting together (while the pastor keeps his personal vision in his vest pocket, rather than trying to foist his pre-conceived plans onto a suspicious congregation).⁷⁰

After working through the development of a mission statement for Risen Savior, our vision setting process lasted several months and involved the vast majority of the members in small group cottage meetings, studying Biblical examples of vision setting and trying to understand what opportunities God was presenting to us at that time and in that place. In late 1999, by unanimous consent we adopted our first five-year vision statement. It put on paper our belief that the Great Commission called for our church to reflect our neighborhood's ethnic diversity; our neighborhood's many young children offered an opportunity to begin a grade school; and all this would require an expanded staff and facilities. Earnest prayer for God's blessings followed. The process helped produce congregational ownership. More than just the work of a committee or the product of a short-term project, this process began to change the very way that our congregation was wired. Our focus was outward. The document became the road map for our journey together.

We didn't keep this road map hidden in the glove box. This vision had to be shared again and again by the healthy leaders of the congregation. It was woven into sermons, council meetings, stories shared about what someone was doing or how the ministry had touched someone. I don't think it is an understatement to claim -- "It is important to understand that every phone call, email, conversation, and interaction with someone in the congregation can be a crucial moment for casting vision."⁷¹ Does your congregation know that you possess a tenacious spirit that compels you to focus on reaching the lost for the sake of our Savior as this is articulated in your congregation's vision? I appreciate the advice that I've received to always "cast this vision" in a positive light -- not by guilt or negativism. And that you dare not use sarcasm or any put downs of those who do not share your vision. Tenderness, love, and patience can bring change in those who disagree.⁷² I think it is fair to say that over time, the entire congregation came to stand behind that vision. That was evidenced in unanimous votes to start a school (which didn't serve any of our own children),⁷³ to build an expansion that cost over \$1.5 million, and the collection of the 3-year appeal that raised over \$200,000 -- far exceeding our leaders' expectations.

Here's why healthy gospel-centered leadership is needed in planning:

Leadership, then, is not a set of traits that a 'good leader' must have but an activity that can be exercised by various people in the congregation. As an activity, leadership involves (1) helping people in the congregations gain a realistic understanding of its particular situation and circumstances; (2) assisting members to develop a vision for their corporate life that is faithful to the best of their understanding of God and God's purposes for the congregation in this time and place; and (3) helping members embody that vision in the congregation's corporate life.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ This is not to say that the pastor does not provide leadership in the formation of a congregational vision statement. He wants to avoid the appearance that his personal vision must be the congregation's collective vision. He seeks to lead and train key leaders by investing time with them so that they understand clearly the mission of the church and the key issues facing the congregation in the coming years.

⁷¹ Bordin, Paul: *Direct Hit*, p. 50

⁷² I recall especially one woman who was opposed to starting a school. She made her opinion very public. She even told me, "You are the worst thing ever to happen to Risen Savior!" Our leaders dealt with her very patiently, walking with her through several challenges allowed her to accept the decision of the overwhelming majority of members. She remains a member and even smiles now when she sees me -- but not every Sunday!

⁷³ Risen Savior Lutheran School opened its doors in 2003 with 50 children, none of whom were members of the church at that time. Today, the outreach-oriented school is a full K4 to 8th grade with a student body of over 200.

⁷⁴ *Studying Congregations Handbook*, p. 17

Once again, healthy plans come from healthy leaders who lead from healthy attitudes that are outward focused. To my way of thinking, this is a stewardship issue about how we are to faithfully use our gifts for the sake of the lost. Does this warning not seem in place?

The number one health issue, from my limited vantage point, is a church's understanding of and commitment to mission. The church's purpose, both outreach/evangelism in the community and growing the saints to real maturity, gets distorted into a consumer-minded care for church members – on their terms, within the comfort zone of the pastor, and with the permission of long-time and loud gate-keepers. Preserving the institution and satisfying key members replaces mission all too easily. And there is little real concern for the people of the community who are going to hell without Jesus.⁷⁵

It is not enough for the pastoral physician to adopt the second plank of the Hippocratic oath – “to do no harm.” We seek to heal by putting plans in place that will lead to a healthier church – meaning a church that makes plans to seek the lost.

4. Looking for change to healthier actions

“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the costs to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish’” (Lk 14:28-30).

Good planning leads to healthier actions. In a healthy congregation, after the leaders set purposeful and measurable ministry goals, the people work to achieve them. After you're done planning, it is time to get “Off your butt and out of the rut.”⁷⁶ This calls for fresh fruits of the Spirit!

There are far too many pastors' shelves filled with three-ring binders with wonderful, detailed, logical plans which never get pulled off the shelf and put into action in the practical lives of God's people. That includes my shelves, too. Shame on us!

Healthy behavior acts! Aggressively reaching out. Making calls. Visiting people. Praying for the sick. Training others for sharing in the work. Following through on our well-made plans. What prevents us from such God-pleasing actions? “The Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (Mt 26:41). Our New Man delights to carry out God's will but our Old Adam resists it mightily. It is a problem that is as old as the struggle of the disciples to keep alert in the Garden of Gethsemane (and actually its roots reach back to the first Garden when sin began).

Too often we're not counting the cost of what it takes to build “the tower.” Do we understand the severity of what is at stake? Here is where accountability and assessment are required. In a healthy congregation, leaders evaluate and measure the congregation's ministry against the plans of mission and vision in order to seek accountability for the ministry goals. “Somehow we must overcome in our ministry culture the reluctance to be responsible or accountable to our fellow Christians. My sinful heart knows how to turn great gospel freedom into a cloak to cover evil. Could it be that often we are tempted to hide from accountability because it would lead to just rebuke? Somehow we get stuck on understanding what a blessing to gospel ministry it can be to have the open and honest feedback of others in the body of Christ.”⁷⁷ If we don't evaluate whether we are achieving what we said we'd accomplish, we are victims either of a gross pessimism (that doubts God's ability to bless) or an arrogant confidence (that assumes we can do no wrong).

The gospel's importance demands the best, not only in intentions, but also in actions!

⁷⁵ Kelm, Rev. Paul in an email (dated May 20 2009) sent to the authors of the church health symposium papers.

⁷⁶ Mueller, Rev. Wayne in an interview.

⁷⁷ Gurgel, Prof. Richard in an interview.

5. Looking for change that expects healthier results

“And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47b). The early church understood the joy of Third Article confidence in using First Article gifts. Any eternal results are God’s doing and to his credit when we faithfully proclaim Second Article truths.

“Seek ye first the kingdom of God and the stats and numbers will be added unto you.” Christ didn’t exactly say it that way but he might as well have. It is true. It is not about numbers. It is about the kingdom which results in lasting fruit that only the Holy Spirit can produce. How much do we need this perspective? How easy is it for us to focus on a worldly definition of “success” that ignores the true victories of the gospel? How easy is it to look over the neighbor’s fences and feel cheated by the number of sheep in our fold compared to his?

Results from the gospel are best seen through the eyes of faith. Pastors should be able to share stories that demonstrate the gospel at work which members might miss. We tell at least five minutes of gospel victory stories at each voters’ meeting and open forum. Our new by-laws call for an agenda item which we call “Celebrating God’s Blessings.” The presenter for this regular agenda item changes each time. I still recall my associate telling about a young Hispanic boy in our school finding his uncle carrying into the house a statue of Mary. “Why do you have a statue of Mary?” the knee-high child asked his uncle. “So I can pray to her and she’ll bless me.” “That’s idolatry. Mary can’t answer your prayers,” the child confidently replied. I still get emotional thinking about this bold confession of a child which could only be born of the gospel. We need to hear stories like this and a thousand more which would never be known if we looked only for brash and bold visible results that dazzle the world. Think about the stories being told in your congregation. If the stories that get retold are negative (about the pastor’s mistake, problems, fears) then you’re unhealthy. If the stories that get retold are positive (gospel victories) then this is a sign of a healthy appreciation for the results that only God gives.

This doesn’t mean that we aren’t concerned with statistics. I watch worship attendance. I joyfully count every baptism. As President Wendland told me, “The statistical report is a good place to start [measuring relative health]. What are your offerings to synod? How many adult confirmands? How many baptisms? How many evangelism calls? These are one gauge of how much time and effort we’re putting in on outreach. Of course, God’s blessings on these efforts vary from congregation to congregation. The same effort may lead to different outcomes. The Spirit still blows where he wills. But to ignore statistics would be a mistake.”⁷⁸ This is not just looking, however, in terms of numbers; we ought to be concerned about measuring how many people we’re sharing the gospel with each year. Let’s measure how much of pastor’s time is spent in direct outreach efforts. How about measuring how many members are trained? Again, this is a stewardship issue. I want to use wisely the things we can control or have been entrusted with – like my time, my mind and my body. We seek to measure our activity to bring the gospel or nurture the faith of the people that we serve. Confidence in the power of the Word means that we want to scatter a lot of seed and can expect the Spirit to bless. If we are carrying out a comprehensive evangelism program and I am making calls on the unchurched, I expect that we’ll have at least ten adult confirmands each year. If we don’t have ten, I don’t lose my Third Article confidence but I start asking myself tough questions about whether I’ve been faithful with my First Article gifts in using the Means of Grace. I thank Prof. Gurgel for saying, “There is great comfort in knowing that God is often accomplishing much that I can’t see. But where the Means of Grace are not being used, I handcuff what God promises.”⁷⁹

Can we still set some benchmarks for relative health in our congregations? Are we healthy if we have fewer than 10% in weekly Bible class? Are we healthy if we’re not growing? Can a weekly worship attendance

⁷⁸ Wendland, Rev. Paul in an interview

⁷⁹ Gurgel, Prof. Richard in an interview

under 50% indicate that the people whom we serve have a healthy attitude towards the Means of Grace? How about trying to measure how many of our people use the Word beyond Sunday morning? Aren't those fair diagnostic questions which give us meaningful indicators? I am not trying to establish rigid benchmarks for determining the relative health of one church against another. But surely, numbers are worth paying careful attending to and struggling to assess.

While numbers do indicate something, and we would be foolish to disregard them completely, rising totals alone don't allow a declaration of "success." Perhaps we have to redefine "success" in the context of our ministry. Some are tempted to gauge health merely in terms of three "b"s: buildings, budgets, and bums in the pews. There may be more to quantify than how big our buildings are, how big our budget is and by how many bums we have in a pew on any given Sunday – although I don't disparage those things as being unimportant! Let's consider how we may also measure "health" in our ministerial faithfulness by more than the metrics of square footage, return on investment and attendance. We can find joy flowing from our Third Article confidence:

- When the people we serve move from talking about the church as a fortress into seeing our church as an oasis in the community.
- When the people we serve can tell stories of God's undeniable work in the people they know and the congregation serves.
- When community leaders call asking for our congregation to help solve a local community problem.
- When the people we serve are proud to invite friends and relatives (and tell us about their efforts to do so).
- When people are increasingly living their lives in joyful response to the gospel by loving and serving others sacrificially and passionately.
- When the people that we serve are joyfully receiving the body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar and it shows in their faces when they walk back to the pews.
- When we witness a culture of loving encouragement and support for those who are struggling.

None of this shows up in the annual statistical report, but I celebrate these Spirit-produced fruits of our Means of Grace ministry!

Perhaps some new perspectives need to be explored that help measure "results" in fresh ways. Christian Washington observed the powerful change in the thinking processes in "cutting-edge"⁸⁰ churches, when they move:

- From building wings to building bridges in the community.
- From measuring attendance to measuring impact.
- From encouraging saints to attend services to equipping saints for work of service.
- From self-focused "serve us" to service.
- From duplication of human services and ministries to partnering with existing services and ministries.⁸¹
- From condemning the city to blessing and praying for it.
- From being a minister in a congregation to being a minister in a parish.⁸²

⁸⁰ The author's unfortunate term, not mine.

⁸¹ Please note that I'd be cautious about exploring this since it has the potential for pitfalls. However, we can seek relationships with other groups and organizations outside our fellowship as long as we are actually talking about "cooperation in externals." For example, our congregation is a member of the local chamber of commerce and I sit on its board of directors. It is not a religious organization, and we are not linked in any joint-religious activity.

Ask yourself, “How many of these results move our eyes off of the institution and focus on others?” Perhaps there is greater joy in valuing results of this kind than simply trying to compare stats with others who are on the same team.⁸³

Here is the narrow Lutheran way. Pride is the cliff that one can fall off on the one side and ministerial depression awaits a misstep on the other side. We walk down a narrow middle. How do we find the narrow Lutheran middle way? Not giving into our own ambition to be “successful” by the standard that other people set for us. Not seeking the praise of men, but glorifying God in service to the gospel. This is the challenge that is solved in the honest evaluation of the crosses that we face (1 Tm 1:12ff) and the grace which washes over us and appoints us for service (Phil 3:13).

Don Cousins in the book *Experiencing LeaderShift* offers refreshing perspectives on the issue. This is surprising when one considers that he is an Evangelical who came out of the Willow Creek megachurch “success-is-driven-by-numbers” model. But it also left him exhausted. He offers some surprising insights, after he found himself counseling pastors whose ministries were once considered “highly successful” but now whose ministries have plateaued. He writes, “While rising numbers tempt us with pride, falling numbers often bring discouragement.”⁸⁴ He found the pastors reasoning, “If God is ‘blessing’ when the numbers go up, what is God doing when they plateau or decline?” He discovered leaders who were “Rejoicing over what God was doing was being smothered by grumbling about what He wasn’t doing.”⁸⁵ His answer sounds decidedly like the narrow Lutheran middle way as he warns against the dangers of self-centered drivenness; the temptation to compromise the truth for the sake of stats; and the attraction for enjoying the taste of comparison (which can only lead to either competition or jealousy).

Here are four helpful questions that might lead us to a healthier exploration of God-pleasing results.⁸⁶

1) Are you being faithful? Faithfulness is doing what God asks you to do, using the talents that he has given you. Remember he gives talents in different measures (see Mt 25:14-30), and the Savior has the same message of pleasure for both those who had different results – “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Why was he pleased with both – even though the results were different? The gifts were different. Your results will be different than your neighbor but your unique talents are different also. Christ only expects results that flow from the faithful use of your own talents.

2) Are you bearing fruit? The world might measure a man’s value only by the trophies that he can line up on the mantel. But Christ is more concerned about your relationship in connection to him, than what you can do for him. Serve him without a burden of trying to win his acceptance. Consider how the “fruits” of the Spirit in Galatians (5:22-23) flow from the Holy Spirit’s indwelling in us by the gospel not from the efforts of the believer to earn Christ’s pleasure. Is my life characterized more and more by peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, etc. as I bask in

⁸² “Building the Externally Focused Church,” www.leadnet.org/resources/recourses.asp. Note: a “parish” is typically defined by the geographical area in which a group of people live (which includes those who are already members of the congregation and those who are not) as contrasted to a “congregation” which is typically defined only as the group of people who are already members.

⁸³ There is something much better about a team having a winning record in baseball than for an individual player to boast a high batting average (but be on a losing team). In a similar fashion, perhaps we need to see there is something better about being concerned about how we’re doing as a synod (our team), than as individuals boasting high averages in the synod’s statistical report. Another example of this is a pastor in a small church bringing in a young couple and then seeing them transfer to the other congregation in town with the Lutheran Elementary School. The pastor is disappointed, but the kingdom is growing.

⁸⁴ Cousins, Don: *Experiencing LeaderShift*, p. 63

⁸⁵ Cousins, Don: *Experiencing LeaderShift*, p. 64

⁸⁶ These are inspired by Don Cousins’ *Experiencing LeaderShift*.

the gospel? Then God be praised for his work in me! Let those be the fruits that I treasure more than mere stats.

3) Are you fulfilled? Do you find your life, your ministry fulfilling – that is “making you full” – full of joy? Remember the disciples returning from their first ministry experiences “filled with joy” (Lk 10:17). Jesus told them not to rejoice at the demon’s submission (outward results) as much as “rejoice that your names are written in heaven (our status with God through faith in Christ Jesus)” (Lk 17:20). Joy is the blessing of faithful and fruitful service. That joy isn’t available only when everything in ministry appears to be “successful” (e.g. the demons submitting to you) but we also find the same disciples “rejoicing” after God “blessed” their ministry with a public flogging (Acts 5:41). Fulfillment in ministry isn’t tied to mere outward successes but such holy joy can be discovered in every circumstance where we know that heaven is our home and that our faithful service is bearing fruits that will last. Some times we need to look a little closer and perhaps under a few leaves to see those “fruits.”

4) Are you giving God the glory? “So that in all things God may be praised...To him be the glory” (1 Pt 4:11). Isn’t God’s love amazing? Isn’t his truth wonderful? We let our light shine that he might receive the glory that he deserves (Mt 5:16). “This is the Father’s glory” (Jn 15:8).⁸⁷

We can learn things from the trends and patterns expressed in numbers. But to focus on them alone for our comfort or encouragement is to leave us susceptible to pride or discouragement. It can open the door to feelings of frustration or to a drivenness that reflects nothing more than fleshly ambition.⁸⁸ In the end, we trust that God will take care of the numbers since the results are in his good hands.

I HAVE A DREAM...

I have lost a lot of sleep over this paper – more than any assignment in my life. But I want to keep my eyes open for a little bit and share with you a few dreams that I have for the synod I love and the brothers with whom I share the privilege of public ministry. Here are my dreams for the future health of our church body:

The Wisconsin Synod makes outreach its primary focus, not self-preservation. Outreach becomes our very way that we are wired. All of our congregations are re-focused on why they exist – mission and purpose. A sense of urgency to bring the gospel to lost individuals in our communities drives our desire to preserve doctrine, publish sound materials, and train excellent workers all for the sake of flooding the world with missionaries at home and across the globe who will share that truth. The synod beams with the attitude: “What a privilege to proclaim God’s truth to the world!”

The Wisconsin Synod treasures the faithful work of the Board for Parish Services⁸⁹ which was founded and structured to build upon the seminary’s Pastoral Theology courses by providing a national support system for local congregational outreach, nurture, and leadership development. It provides an ally for the challenges facing our congregations. It serves our congregations, our called workers, and the members of WELS by assisting them with new ideas,

⁸⁷ Think of the old Lutheran motto, “To the glory of God and the salvation of man.”

⁸⁸ Cousins, Don: *Experiencing LeaderShift*, p. 81

⁸⁹ Currently, this board and its activities are being re-organized by resolution of the synod convention. The title of those services and the plans for restructuring remains uncertain at the time of this essay’s writing.

resources, and training in order to strengthen, equip and encourage all of God's people to fulfill our Lord's Great Commission in today's work!

Healthy attitudes of brotherly love replace the tendency to label those who appear to have a different approach to ministry. Gone are the cynical and self-destructive thoughts:

- "I have to stay in my bunker."
- "I can teach well enough and preach well enough."
- "The last thing the church needs are 'visionaries.'"
- "Those who go outside the WELS for education can't be trusted to be able to discern."
- "The seminary summer quarter couldn't teach me anything."
- "If I don't come up with it myself, I am not a leader."
- "If someone's church is growing, there must be something to be suspicious of."
- "If someone's church isn't growing numerically, they must be doing something wrong."
- "If you're doing 'contemporary' worship, you must not be orthodox."
- "If you're doing 'traditional' worship, you just don't get it."

These attitudes are replaced with trust and honesty that admits faults, fears, bitterness, angers and frustrations and finds cool refreshment in the pools of God's Word and in the fellowship of loving brothers.

Transformed are the circuit pastors' roles and pastoral conferences. Pastoral conferences foster healthy change, promote peer accountability, and offer practical resources. Presenters who have experienced change are asked to provide unique insights. Circuits are reduced in size so that the circuit pastor is able to better serve as an ear for brothers and a helping hand in their ministries.

A healthy ministerium enjoys a peer structure of support, encouragement and growth which provides healthy accountability. Beginning with seminary training and experience, pastors graduate who consider themselves life-long learners and expect peer counseling and mentoring programs by experienced pastors who have moved through changes. A mentoring model allows and encourages the networking of pastors who have experienced blessing to work with those who are struggling. Veterans and new ministers alike partake in this peer structure and continue to grow. Such mentoring and coaching relationships (where personal issues will be exposed) foster a healthy climate of peer accountability and peer encouragement.

That is my dream. I hope it is not your nightmare. Or should I close my eyes again?

An old story tells about a pastor who noticed the janitor reading his Bible day after day under a tree outside his office window. One day he wandered outside to say hello and to see what the old custodian was reading. To his amazement the Bible was open to the Book of Revelation. The pastor asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" "Sure do!" replied the janitor swallowing the last bite of his sandwich, "It means that Jesus is gonna win."

And so it does. While we may struggle with the relative condition of our own health and those congregations that we serve, our confidence to keep taking our medicine and carrying out the Good Physician's orders does not spring from any doubt concerning the final outcome. Christ and his Church will prevail! So our confidence does not spring from our giftedness or "success" but from the cure that is centered in our salvation guaranteed at the blood-stained cross and the empty tomb. Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come

again! And so we know that Christ Jesus will raise our lifeless, unhealthy bodies to perfect health. What remains to be seen is who will be there with us to celebrate that life of perfect health that is to come!

May God bless your preaching and leading and teaching as you carry out Christ's mission—to his glory and for his people!

To God be the Glory!

APPENDIX A: Growing / Plateaued / Declining Congregations

The following information is based on average worship attendance for the last ten years.

Definitions:

“Growing” = an increase of one or more individuals in worship each year for 10 years

“Plateaued” = an increase or decrease of less than one individual in worship each year for 10 years

“Declining” = a decrease of one or more individuals in worship each year for 10 years

Growing Congregations

| Annual worship attendance increase each year for 10 years | Number of congregations | Percentage of congregations |
|--|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| > 30 | 1 | < 0.1% |
| 21 to 30 | 4 | 0.3% |
| 16 to 20 | 8 | 0.6% |
| 11 to 15 | 15 | 1.2% |
| 6 to 10 | 48 | 3.8% |
| 1 to 5 | 220 | 17.2% |
| TOTAL | 296 | 23.2% |

Only 76 (6%) WELS congregations experienced a weekly worship increase of more than five individuals each year for each of the previous ten years.

Plateaued Congregations

| Annual worship attendance change each year for 10 years | Number of congregations | Percentage of congregations |
|--|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| < 1 to < -1 | 361 | 28.3% |

Declining Congregations

| Annual worship attendance decrease each year for 10 years | Number of congregations | Percentage of congregations |
|--|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| -1 to -5 | 456 | 35.7% |
| -6 to -10 | 70 | 5.5% |
| -11 to -15 | 33 | 2.5% |
| -16 to -20 | 15 | 1.2% |
| -21 to -25 | 5 | 0.4% |
| -26 to -30 | 2 | 0.2% |
| > -30 | 1 | < 0.1% |
| TOTAL | 582 | 45.6% |

Congregations with insufficient/incomplete data or new starts 37 (2.9%)



Prepared by WELS Parish Services
 Bruce Becker, Administrator
 September 28, 2009

APPENDIX B:

*Twelve Characteristics of Healthy and Growing Congregations in WELS
From WELS Leadership Forum – November 2008*

*Excellence in worship and relevance in preaching
Warm, caring, inviting, relational atmosphere
Priority on outreach, with intentional strategies*

** * * * **

*Member commitment to spiritual growth and service
Adaptability to surrounding culture,
with pointed involvement in the community
Significant ministry to children, especially in early childhood*

** * * * **

*Strong, long-term pastoral leadership
Empowered and equipped lay leadership
Flexible, entrepreneurial, and permission-giving congregational climate
Unified staff with shared philosophy of ministry*

** * * * **

*Adding ministry staff to develop ministry programs and facilitate growth
Quality facilities and adequate space*

Bruce Becker, Administrator

WELS Parish Services

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Brothers in Ministry Arrange for Congregational Health: A Response

Looking for a Prescription for Healthy Change

Professor James Tiefel

First of all, as the chairman of the committee that plans these seminary symposia, I'd like to apologize to Pastor Fisher for being partially responsible for his excessive loss of sleep over the past months. We don't mean to lay burdens on brothers when we ask them to serve at these events. But you may gain some payback, brother, for you have written some things here that likely will cause me to lose some sleep — or at least drive me to a health club and a personal trainer.

I haven't been a pastor in 25 years. I'm a pastor member of a congregation where I preach and am active in ministry; some members even call me Pastor Tiefel. I teach future pastors about pastoral ministry, and I try to stay current. One could say that I "pastor" students occasionally. I think I think like a pastor. But I haven't been a pastor in a long time, and it's somewhat difficult to remember the everyday work and effort — physical, emotional, and spiritual — that goes into being a pastor. If I were still a pastor it might have been more difficult to listen to Pastor Fisher this morning. And it might be more difficult to drive back to my parsonage today knowing that more is expected of me than I'm already doing.

Although this essay carries a title that focuses on congregational health, it very much deals with pastoral health because it recognizes honestly the pastor's key role in forming and maintaining congregational health. Deep down in his heart every pastor knows that "congregations eventually reflect their pastors" (page 13), but there is something very comforting in the truth that "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1). Pastor Fisher began in the right place when he wrote:

We accept with joy the blessings of health when they are apparent and we don't despair when our faithful use of the Means of Grace doesn't appear to produce "health." This truth shapes our expectations of what health looks like and how we accomplish it (page 5).

He also reminded us of an axiom that is almost sacred in our circles, that men with a wide variety of gifts are able to serve in the pastoral ministry.

We celebrate the truth that Christ gives a wide variety of gifts to those who are called into the public ministry and to each congregation. We respect that everyone brings different gifts to the table (page 6).

The wide variety of gifts doesn't speak only to intellect or skills, either. It also pertains to stamina, creativity, emotion, and personality. Some men simply need more sleep than others, and some have trouble dreaming dreams. Some men laugh and some men weep more than others.

It could be that one of the reasons we pastors sometimes cringe at the thought of professional evaluation and assessment is the worry that evaluation is going to entail some sort of personality makeover, a morphing

into something we never were, not in childhood or school or marriage and certainly not in pastoral ministry. I surely can grow spiritually, I can develop better habits, I can gain more knowledge and sharpen my skills, I can learn to use new tools in ministry, but I can't become what I am not. The essay reminds us that we don't have to become someone else. The person we are is the person God made, and that's good.

It is essential, of course, that we pastors understand the difference between personality traits and personal choices. The need for sleep may be a personality trait; the desire to sleep often may be laziness. There is a fine line between these two, and often I'm the last man to be able to recognize the difference. That's where brothers in the ministry can act like brothers. It's one thing for a brother occasionally to let his hair down and relax; it's another thing when the brother is usually sloshing his words at the end of the night. We may give a brother some slack when he complains about the parish alligator; it's another thing when conversations about the sheep are consistently negative. We can do better when it comes to brotherly admonition, for the sake of the brother as much as for the sake of his people. We expect our district president and perhaps our circuit pastor to be a pastor-to-pastors, but they ought not be the only ones who carry out that function. Love doesn't go looking for sin, nor does it delight in exposing it. But love needs to be ready to act with a brother pastor when sin begins to damage and destroy. Pastor Fisher points us to the beauty of that kind of "assessment":

It is the Bible's teaching about law and gospel that makes assessment and evaluation a joyful task for pastors and congregations. For one thing, the law speaks only to sins, not to growth or methods. The law doesn't call a man a sinner if his congregation fails to grow. A man is a sinner only when he has failed to be faithful, to love, etc. But even when he does sin, the gospel is there to restore and empower change (page 6).

I thank the essayist for bringing together a variety of perspectives to identify what really makes for a healthy congregation. I'll quote only one voice, Paul Wendland's, but his is not unlike the others:

"A healthy congregation is a group of Christians united in the gospel of Jesus Christ, eager to grow inwardly to know Jesus better and better, and eager to help neighbors who don't know Jesus into the same joy that they know" (page 10).

I'm not an expert in synodical history, but I've lived in this synod for almost 60 years and have plenty of pastors in my family tree. I'm going to be bold and suggest that the second half of this definition is being stressed today more than it was a generation ago. I knew my dad canvassed the neighborhoods around my church because that's what my mom told me he was doing, but I actually saw him mixing mortar for the laymen who were laying the concrete blocks that raised one school addition after another. I don't think it's an overstatement to say that not so very long ago "growing inwardly to know Jesus better and better" was thought to be the critical sign of congregational health. A congregation was healthy if it had a school, healthier if it supported a Lutheran high school. The fight against encroaching liberalism both in society and the church seemed to call for a certain siege mentality: by God's grace we had the Word and with God's strength we needed to hold onto it. Pastors and laypeople broke their backs to build the walls of Christian education to protect the "future of the church." In the 1950s, these were our spiritual "bomb shelters." And it was not as though we did this as self-serving little islands, thinking only of "me and my wife, our son John and his wife, us four and no more." We were encouraged to do this; to begin a Lutheran elementary school was almost a synodical mandate, even on the mission fields. And that's why, I think, the sometimes snooty charge of "maintenance ministry" stings so much. Weren't we taught and encouraged to maintain the truth and the faith of God's people?

Of course, “growing inwardly” and “helping neighbors who don’t know Jesus” were never mutually exclusive. It was always a matter of “both/and.” It is true enough that we need to get our eye back on the mission ball, and Pastor Fisher’s experience at Risen Savior demonstrates that “both/and” works. God help us if we ever lose sight of Adolph Hoenecke’s confessionalism, but we would do well to reclaim some of Edgar Hoenecke’s mission spirit.

Could it be, however, that the perspective of our fathers is going to be harder to adjust than we think? Is it part of what makes evaluation and assessment so difficult? I lived in my father’s house for twenty-plus years; so did other pastors’ sons. And laymen’s sons gained a picture of ministry from their pastors, too. “You are what you eat,” the axiom maintains. The kind of pastoral ministry Pastor Fisher urges is very different from the model I saw in my father, uncles, and grandfathers — and frankly, it’s very different from the model most of the students at the seminary have seen in their home congregations:

One brother in the ministry often speaks of his challenge in moving from being a “shepherd” (who is able to personally minister to every member of his flock one-to-one) to a “rancher” (who oversees the ministry and equips others to do the primary shepherding) as his ministry grew. Isn’t the goal of a healthy ministry to let members claim active roles in congregation’s ministry of the Word according to their spiritual gifts and passion so that they build up one another? Therefore, we seek to avoid micromanaging the congregation’s ministry. We look to avoid any appearance that the pastor must “control” every aspect of ministry. (page 19).

What I mean to say is that the roles of the pastor as shepherd and guardian — even that of gate-keeper — are deeply ingrained in us. I think I understand the paradigm shift; I see it in action in my own congregation. Essentially, it builds on the truth that we need to hold to the Word and hold out the Word at the same time. I believe this paradigm of pastoral ministry is a correct and God-pleasing application of Ephesians 4:11. But my own pastors know that I have struggled with it occasionally because it is very unlike what I learned from the models that in part formed my ministry. My father thought of himself as a missionary (and rightly so), but he chaired “his” church council for 45 years. It is going to take time to make the adjustment Pastor Fisher suggests, as important and necessary as it is, because it obligates us to think again about what we thought was handed down to us from our fathers.

It may be that the same commitment to the Word that encourages a certain defense mode among us also makes it difficult sometimes to differentiate between the gospel which is always efficacious and ministry methods which may or may not be effective and efficient. Our pastors have sometimes struggled seeing this difference, and it was helpful that the essay brought this subject to the table again. The foolishness of the cross does not excuse foolish preaching. Here, perhaps, is where assessment and evaluation can serve us best in the short term as we commit ourselves to discover the tools that work best to share the gospel. I have never served in a place where I was not surrounded on a regular basis by pastor brothers, whether in a dual pastorate, as a preaching assistant, or a member of faculty. While not every encouragement to improve was as blunt as Brother Bivens’ one morning, “Tiefel, if that text were small pox, you would have never caught it,” I will say that every encouragement and challenge has been beneficial and made me a better pastor, preacher, and professor. Brothers in ministry can help us form new attitudes and adopt new strategies for stewardship training, dealing with man/woman issues, planning worship and outreach, etc. We can work together to get past our occasional hesitancy to learn and grow. From personal experience I echo what Pastor Fisher wrote:

Is this fear of constructive criticism what keeps many from asking for help from a brother, engaging Parish Assistance, attending a School of Worship Enrichment, or organizing for a School of Outreach? Although such events can worry even the most self-assured clergyman of what he might look like with his pants down, I have found the most positive changes in our

ministry setting come from the shared experiences, wisdom and insights from consultants (page 21).

One of the encouragements that comes from consultants or from any brother who does this well is to look ahead. Call it vision or long-range planning, Pastor Fisher is right to encourage more of it. There are many aspects of leadership that are difficult, and the essay points to some of them:

willingness to try new ideas, openness to learn from others, willingness to learn from leaders outside the WELS, willingness to fail, willingness to adapt....willingness to make hard decisions – relocate, release a worker, borrow... (page 21)

But it isn't so difficult to plan a course of action for the future, to look ahead beyond the budget year, so identify opportunities for both nurture and outreach and then create strategies to attain them. We can't allow the constraints of a busy schedule or fears (really unwarranted) that long-range planning obligates the Spirit to a human timetable keep us from dreaming and then sharing dreams with our members.

I share Pastor Fisher's dreams for the future of our synod. I dream for a day when all our efforts at pastoral training and encouragement join forces and work together on the same biblical page to help pastors — and I am one of them, and I teach others — to become better pastors. We have committed ourselves as a synod to see our primary task as missions and training workers, but training workers doesn't stop with their graduation. As we brothers strive together to grow and improve, the Spirit will bless our stewardship and, in so doing, will bless the congregations we serve.