



Pastoral Visitation: Reflections on Paul's Work and Wisdom for the Church Today

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Introduction

In 2014, congregations of the LCMS ratified the 2013 convention's approval to amend Article XII of the Synod Constitution to change the term "circuit counselor" to "circuit visitor." Resolution 7-02A titled "To Return to Use of Title 'Circuit Visitor'" passed by a vote of 704 to 257. President Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison said from the floor of the convention, "[Martin Luther] bases the entire structure of the Lutheran church government on the word 'visitation.' It's about caring for one another... Our Constitution is completely based upon visitation."¹ Article XII was originally amended at the 1959 Synod Convention in San Francisco based on submitted memorials that read, "The term 'Visitor' does not fully cover the responsibilities of such position, and indicates little relation between such person and congregation," and "The term 'Circuit Visitor' has become obsolete and archaic for proper identification in our Lutheran circles, inasmuch as it is oftentimes misunderstood..."²

Perhaps for the sake of constitution articles and by-laws, terms need to be modified to fully encapsulate their intrinsic meaning. However, I would argue that there is no better word to use than "Visitor" when describing the true function and essence of the Office of Pastor³. In function, the pastor meets the people of God where they are, gives what

¹ "Congregations OK 'circuit visitor' convention action," *Reporter*, April 2014, 3. The Synodical Handbook of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and other States, 1924, VII, in the section called, "For the Visitors" states on page 51, "What the purpose of visitations shall be, can be seen from the object for which the Synod has been organized..."

² Taken from the Reports and Memorials of the Forty-Forth Regular Convention, San Francisco, CA, June 17-27, 1959. The Proceedings read in the Resolve that the title "Visitor" be changed to "Circuit Counselor" and that the necessary changes be made in the Synodical Handbook.

³ Often translated "overseer" in 1 Timothy 3:1-2, the pastor is a ἐπίσκοπος, which means he is a visitor. In 1 Timothy 3:1, the pastoral office is referred to by the feminine ἐπισκοπή, while the man in the office (the pastor) is referred to by the masculine ἐπίσκοπος in 1 Timothy 3:2.

they need, and serves as Jesus in their midst. In essence, Jesus Himself is placed directly into the lives of the sinner when the Absolution is spoken and the Sacraments are delivered. Jesus, quite literally, makes the dead alive again with His active presence penetrating the soul of the sinner. He is “*the visitor beyond the sun, the dayspring from on High*”⁴ (Luke 1:78) as the Lord’s called servants breach the doorposts of home and hospital room with the comforting power of Jesus’ love and forgiveness.

“The frequency with which the synoptic Gospels report that Jesus visited persons in their own homes makes it evident how important this context was for the ministry of Jesus.”⁵ Take, for example, Jesus at the home of Levi (Luke 5:29), the wedding at Cana (John 2: 1, 2), the house of the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50; 14:1-24), the house of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) and the house of Simon the leper (Matthew 26:6) to name just a few.⁶ When Jesus came into these places, His essence was put into function for the sake of those He served. He entered the home of Simon and Andrew and healed Simon’s mother-in-law of her fever by simply taking her by the hand (Mark 1:29-31). Since the pastor’s ministry is the ministry of the Word, pastoral visitation gives the opportunity to actively bring with it what Christ gave so freely in the Gospels – healing and life. Where Christ’s Word is, there is Christ. Thus in the ministry of the pastor, an individual is served by Christ. The pastor himself is not Christ, but Christ is indeed near through the life-giving Word that flows from his lips. When His Word visits, Luther observes that Jesus is, “closer to you through His Word than your son with his arms entwined around your neck.”⁷ The pastor demonstrates through the visit that Christ desires to come and serve this house.⁸ Luther, again, observes that Jesus is our ultimate example of visitation when he said, “More than any Christ has done this kind of work on behalf of all, and on this account possessed no place on earth where He could lay His head or

⁴ Jonathan F. Grothe, *Reclaiming Patterns of Pastoral Ministry: Jesus and Paul* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988), 96-97.

⁵ Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1983), 174.

⁶ More examples, such as Jesus at the house of the paralytic, at Jairus’ house, and His presence at the house of Zaccheaus show the breadth and depth of our Savior’s visitation to those who would seem unworthy to have the Son of God in their midst.

⁷ *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955-1987), 23:42; henceforth AE.

⁸ On this subject, see also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Spiritual Care by Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Trans. Jay C. Rochelle, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1985.

which He could call His own. This began even in the womb, for He went with His mother to visit St. John” (Luke 1:39).⁹

In the book of Acts the apostle Paul carried out this “Christ-like” ministry by modeling the behavior of Jesus. Paul went from town to town, met the people in houses and synagogues, and proclaimed the essence (Jesus) of life. For the purpose of this paper, I will elaborate on the topic of pastoral visitation by using as an outline three different Pauline visitation scenarios found in Acts. The purpose will not be to exposit Paul’s ministry of visitation by exegetically delving deep into the biblical text. Rather, Paul’s experience will help frame some of the struggles and blessings that go along with the “why” and the “how” of pastoral visitation. Finally, I hope to share some encouragement in congregational and community visitation for pastors. My desire is to help and encourage fellow brothers in the ministry to see that visitation is not just one of the many tasks we carry out during the week, but rather the essential task. Like Paul demonstrates, there are struggles and problems that come with pastoral visitation. For this reason, visitation is difficult, feared, and sometimes ignored. However, God also provides rich opportunities and blessed encouragement through visitation. More than all of this for us as *seelers* is the fact that Jesus meets His people through those who serve with His words of hope and life. As Paul says to the Church in Rome, “*I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ*” (Romans 15:29 ESV). Jesus’ ministry for the sake of those we serve reaches beyond the chancel railing, beyond the Sunday school classroom, and beyond the pastor’s study door.

First, I will examine some of the modern difficulties we have as visitors, with an eye on Paul’s struggles in Acts 14, as well as various reasons (purpose) for visitation. Second, I will examine Paul’s call to Barnabas in Acts 15:36, “*Let us return and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing*” with an emphasis on “how” the Word is brought into the home didactically and liturgically. Third, Paul gives specific instructions along with encouragement to overseers in Acts 20:17-38. For us pastors today, the Word is our guide, our light and our strength in the midst of the spiritual warfare against sin, death, and the devil that we encounter on a daily basis.

Acts 14:21-23 – The Struggle and the Purpose

“There is no ministry more subject to ingratitude and rebellion than that of the care of souls.”¹⁰ Paul’s personal struggles with the care of souls through visitation led him to

⁹ AE 40:269.

flee for his life from Iconium and be stoned nearly to death at Lystra (Acts 14). For Paul, the bold proclamation of the Gospel constantly put his livelihood in jeopardy. Though for some brave missionaries in today's world there are still struggles in matters of life and death, most all of us have not experienced such a severe level of persecution. Yet, to many sincere pastors, visitation is still among the most distasteful aspects of their work.¹¹ Visitation is time consuming and it can be difficult for the pastor to justify in his own mind the time spent making home visits and the meaningfulness or value of those calls. It should be noted that the intrinsic value of visitation is clearly recognized in the ministry of Jesus (as mentioned above), the work of the early apostles ("*from house to house they never stopped teaching and proclaiming*" Acts 5:42), and that, of course, of Paul in his various missionary journeys. However, for the pastor, visitation is plagued with obstacles and encumbrances that seem to constantly persist. Parents work late and children are spread thin with all sorts of evening activities. The single mom may not desire for the pastor to see her unkempt house. The elderly couple has home healthcare coming to the house multiple times a day and don't feel it necessary that the pastor stop by to "check" on them. Some of these difficulties are of no fault of the pastor and simply cannot be helped. Other problems expose our own personal shortcomings that need to be addressed.¹²

Bonhoeffer said, "Every unsuccessful pastoral visit is a difficult judgment against us, because it will display our lack of spiritual experience and power."¹³ Our human nature desires to quantify the quality of our visitation by how well received we were, how long we stayed, or even if we were able to address their spiritual condition in a certain way. We tend to forget that our visit is about God meeting people on their own ground, establishing relationships, and conveying God's grace to whomever and whatever the situation. This cannot possibly be accomplished in a conversation after a Sunday

¹⁰ Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls* Trans. Peter Beale, (Peoria, IL.-Carlisle PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 191.

¹¹ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 170.

¹² Oden suggests some other obstacles of both kinds that would include: The unreasonable demands of some to be compulsively cared for; the complications of ordering one's valuable time...; the demands on time made by large congregations. Many parishioners are geographically spread out very broadly. So many come to the pastor in times of personal crisis. There may be little time left for the "rounds"; the large number of people working – fewer are at home, and even when they are free, the pastor may not be because of so many scheduled evening meetings; the intense inner resistance pastors themselves often experience toward risk-laden encounters with parishioners on their own home turf (170). I would also add the large number of people who screen calls, as mentioned above, and refuse to answer the doorbell. Many pastors struggle to make personal contact because "personal" communication is becoming less and less the norm. Today more people communicate by email or text than ever before.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Spiritual Care by Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 45.

morning service or weeknight meeting.¹⁴ In Acts chapter 14, Paul returned to the places where he was met with much resistance to strengthen and encourage the disciples. He implored them to continue in the faith and said that the way of the kingdom of God was through many tribulations. For whatever reason or wherever God's servants visit, problems occur. But make no mistake about it; there are good and indispensable reasons to carry forth the ministry of pastoral visitation. As Thomas Oden states, "The pastor's very title and vocational identity stems from the shepherding metaphor, which assumes visiting. The flock is dispersed and scattered vulnerably about in a hazardous world. They will be shielded from thieves and led to fresh water only if the pastor is in the same field with them."¹⁵ Shepherding the sheep moves the pastor from behind the desk, or even standing in a pulpit, into the troubled and afflicted lives of the masses. James reminds us in chapter one, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction..." (James 1:27a ESV).¹⁶

There are many reasons why a pastor should visit the sheep of the flock he is given charge to serve. However, no matter what the circumstance, at the very heart of each visitation is to give practical expression of God's love and care for all the members of His family.¹⁷ The pastoral visit aims to bring God's love but also to win the confidence and love of those whom that pastor visits.¹⁸ It is true that, "Without the confiding love of those whom he desires to benefit, he can do nothing."¹⁹ The blessed opportunity to get to know our parishioners happens more intimately within the context of the home. It is no secret that the better we know those we serve the better we are able to serve them. The better we know our people, the better our preaching will be as well. We are

¹⁴ William D. Horton, "The Pastor's Problems - III. Visiting," *The Expository Times* 92, no. 4 (January 1981), 100-103.

¹⁵ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 172.

¹⁶ Also reference Matthew 25:34-36 to be reminded that when we visit Christ's people in their needs, we visit Jesus.

¹⁷ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 101.

¹⁸ Gerberding notes what a pastoral visit *is not* on pages 386-387 in *The Lutheran Pastor*. He says that visitation is not a social call or, "An inquisitorial visit in which he comes to make an official investigation into the family and private life... No wonder the children would run and hide and the timid women were glad when the parson was gone..." James Hoppin states some uses for visits such as 1) To bring the truth to bear upon the individual; 2) To win the confidence of the people 3) To promote attendance upon the public worship, and attention to all Christian duties; 4) To obtain profitable topics for the pulpit; 5) To give aim and directness to prayer; 6) To quicken the pastor's spirituality; 7) To bear the ministry of the gospel to those who are not able to attend public service; 8) To make and keep a society united. "*Pastoral Theology*," (New York, Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1901) 405-411.

¹⁹ George H. Gerberding, *The Lutheran Pastor* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1902), 388.

better prepared to scratch the itch where it irritates more effectively with either the word of the Law or the Gospel, depending on the situation. Our words will do better work and the preacher find more joy in knowing the needs of his congregation.²⁰

Listening is a key element in visitation. Our preaching will be stocked with good sermon material because the visitor has taken the time to hear and ponder the needs of those he serves. Eugene Peterson magnifies the importance of good listening when he says, "The pastoral act of listening, which is the pastor's major contribution in the creation of stories, takes place ordinarily during arranged acts of counseling and visitation... But both visitation and counseling provide the conditions in which a short story of salvation can be constructed out of the everyday materials that come to light in such conversations."²¹ Christianity by its very essence relies on conversation. Productive conversation for the sake of the soul-sick individual relies on good listening. Although learning has afforded the pastor an academic skill set to understand and apply the word of Law and Gospel, listening provides specific knowledge of the flock and, therefore, is essential for the practical application of the rightly divided Word.²² "Visitation is more likely to break through the deadly silence of formality than anything else the pastor can do. It invites people to open up about their feelings, uncertainties, hopes and limitations."²³

The value and blessedness of God's family gathered around Word and Sacrament at the Divine Service is often lost within the context of today's individualistic and narcissistic idealism. Society tends to celebrate uniqueness more than community and often calls behaviors that express singularity brave and courageous.²⁴ The intrinsic value of the gathered guests at the Divine Service still remains central to the Christian faith. In the pew we hear the blessed message of hope and comfort. At the altar, the blessed Supper

²⁰ Gerberding, *The Lutheran Pastor*, 385. Gerberding also quotes Matthew Henry as he advises young ministers by saying, "Acquaint yourselves with the state of the people's souls, their temptations, their infirmities. You will then know better how to preach to them."

²¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 89.

²² Oden states, "Although study and other pressing duties may indeed compete with visitation for time, it may be shortsighted to forever pit them against each other. For the effective result of long hours of study are often best brought to practical result in pastoral conversation. There Scripture is unpacked, tradition re-appropriated, the church's teaching probed, the Christian ethic made experiential." *Pastoral Theology*, 179.

²³ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 178.

²⁴ We perhaps call to mind the Michael Sam media coverage as he became the first openly gay man to be drafted into the National Football League on May 9th, 2014. He also received the Arthur Ash Award for Courage at the 2014 ESPY Awards.

is given and received with the celestial community of angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. Much is lost, and misplaced, when the gathering of saints around Word and Sacrament is asserted as second fiddle to special program ministries thought to be “meeting the needs of individuals or families.” Yet, in the midst of all the cultural trends, gimmicks, and fads, the Divine Service remains central to the Christian life. Further, I would argue, visitation is central to the Divine Service and the Divine Service is central to visitation. Each serves to strengthen the other. The one is intertwined with the other. “The purpose of the visitation, absolution and communion of the sick, one might say, is so to strengthen those to whom we minister that they become lions breathing out fire to terrify the devil and to proclaim convincingly the eternal life in which they, together with the whole church on earth and in heaven, now live. Such is the strength and medicine of immortality.”²⁵

Acts 15:36 – The How

John Pless, in his book *Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross*, states, “The practice of visitation might be said to reach back to the New Testament Church where after the Jerusalem Council Paul says to Barnabas, ‘Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing’” (Acts 15:36).²⁶ In terms of the “how” of visitation, much has already been written about bishops (episcopoi) visiting pastors in order to supervise doctrine and life.²⁷ Though perhaps this part of the “how” of visitation would be helpful to pastors visiting their individual flocks, there is not enough time to go into great detail on this subject. Luther, Chemnitz and a host of others wrote extensively on this kind of visitation that has been utilized by the LCMS for the sake of orderly pastoral oversight of pastors and congregations.²⁸

²⁵ Philip H. Pfatteircher, “Some Early and Later Fathers on the Visitation of the Sick,” *Pro Ecclesia* 19 no. 2 (Spring 2010), 222.

²⁶ John T. Pless, *Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross: A Study of Luther's Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 29.

²⁷ Pless also writes, “The ancient Fathers, Luther observed, also practiced visitation. In fact, Luther argues that the essence of the episcopal office is to visit and examine. To be a bishop is to be a supervisor or visitor.” Pless, *Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross*, 31.

²⁸ See Martin Luther, “Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony”, AE 40:269-320; Martin Chemnitz, “Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion,” (St. Louis, CPH, 1981). John Pless chronicles a brief history indicating that visitation became prominent in the ninth century but the practice goes back earlier in the fifth century where bishops were to make official visits to examine, inspect, correct and teach if necessary. In the late middle-ages the practice of visitation had gradually declined as noted in *Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross*, 29. In his 1879 essay “Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” C.F.W. Walther indicated: “A Synod that is ‘faithful to the Confessions’ must also ‘supervise the faithfulness of its

Perhaps the “how” of visitation can be outlined and chronicled on paper, but a pastor cannot learn how to visit in the classroom or from the study of books. Visitation goes well beyond setting up theoretical situations, structuring templates, or rote memorization of responses to specific questions.²⁹ No situation is like the other when it comes to visiting the sick, the downtrodden soul, the delinquent, or the disgruntled. Oswald Chambers likens what he calls “The worker and the passion for souls” to fishing for men.

“Beware of the people who tell you how to fish! I know a good many people who have tried to learn how to fish from books, but they never did learn. The only way to learn how to fish is to fish. An old sea-captain whom I know very well, who has been a fisherman all his days, told me he met a man who had published a book on how to catch fish. The captain took him out into his boat; they stayed out four hours, but he didn’t have enough strength to put one piece of line over the boat, he was too seasick. That was the instructor of how to catch fish.”³⁰

members.” Various other writings that deal closely with the LCMS can be found in issues addressing visitation in *Der Lutheraner* (Especially an article written by a Dr. Sihler – December, 1847, no 8 – in which he emphasizes that the Office of *Visitor* has nothing to do with apostolic succession, as some thought the young Synod was leaning toward an Episcopal polity). Also, *Der Lutheraner* Vol. 56, 1900, no. 18 dealing with visitation as not a divine command but yet necessary. In *Magazin für Ev. – Luth. Homiletic herausgegeben von der Deutschen ev. =luth. Synode von Missouri, Ohio n.a. st.* (Magazine for Evangelical Lutheran Homiletics published by the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and other States.) There is a helpful sermon on congregational visitation written by “H.L.” which reads in part, “For a visitor (title-*Visitor*) is no different than a simple visitor (from the verb *besuchen* to visit someone – *Besucher*), visitation is no different than a ministerial visit at the congregations, inspection is no different than a checking back, to see how it is going with teaching and life in the congregations and with those who work on that. And since this is done by a pastor who not only stands with us in unity of teaching and the community of believers but is also connected with us through the community of the Synod and himself is elected to such a visit by our congregations, so the church visitations cannot appear strange in the slightest.” 1887, 8-14. In even more recent times, Dr. Roland Wiederaenders in 1970 and revised in 1979 wrote a brief history and rationale for official visits. This can be found in “Guidelines for Official Visits and Evaluations of Congregations and Pastors,” Circuit Counselor’s Manual (2012 Revision), 129-136.

²⁹ Oswald Chambers says, “Keep ourselves in touch, not with theories, but with people, and never get out of touch with human beings.” Oswald Chambers, *Workmen of God: The Cure of Souls* (New York: Gosset and Dunlap, 1938), 5.

³⁰ Chambers, *Workmen of God: The Cure of Souls*, 90. Along those same lines, George Gerberding says, “You cannot learn to visit from books. A true pastoral spirit, a love for souls, an absence of laziness, a living in constant communion with the Savior, and experience will make you a good pastor. You will learn to visit by visiting – that is, if you are that kind of pastor.” Gerberding, *The Lutheran Pastor*, 398-399.

The new pastor will wisely make visitation one of his very first duties.³¹ Each community is unique and has its own nuances. Becoming familiar with one's surroundings is important because a pastor cannot effectively minister in unfamiliar territory.³² We come before God's people in their community and homes as humble servants – as *seelsorgers* – seeking to salve wounds as simple, yet effective, mouthpieces of God. We are to have God's agenda in mind, not our own. St. Paul says to the church in Corinth, "For we are not, like so many peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ" (2 Corinthians 2:17 ESV). Paul made it clear that he is not like the sophists who were hired to do their work—for he is not selling anything and does not have in mind some sort of personal profit. He visits for the sake of the souls God put in place that they might receive care. He is where they are. He is on their level. "The pastoral visit is not the condescending visit of a superior to the inferior, and not the professional visit of one who has something to one who does not have it. It is an act of collaboration in order to demonstrate the mutuality of the Christian discipleship."³³ Perhaps no other location in which the pastor finds himself during the week will require a servant-giving attitude and heart than the living room. That home is the parishioner's domain. That home is their sacred space. We would do well to keep this in mind when looking at the more practical aspects of visitation that include how to conduct our behavior.

St. Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are"³⁴ (Acts 15:36 ESV). The deep concern for the newly established churches in heathen territories caused Paul trouble regarding their spiritual and relational well-being. Paul's presence would be the means by which God brought the peace and comfort of the Gospel in times of uncertainty. For the Christian today, the Lord comes to be the Great Physician not just of our soul, but the entire person. The incarnation was the visible embodiment of God breaking into this

³¹ John H.C Fritz, *Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1945), 71.

³² Kenneth Leech, *Spirituality and Pastoral Care* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1989), 92. Leech suggests that the pastor spend the first month wandering around and familiarizing oneself with the neighborhood. One cannot minister to a people whose culture you ignore, even despise.

³³ Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, 94.

³⁴ R.C.H. Lenski says, "Pws ecousi is an indirect question, literally, 'how they have it,' 'wie sie sich befinden,' 'how they are getting along.'" *The Interpretation of The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1961), 632. I asked Dr. Jeffery Gibbs if Lenski's suggestion of "how they have it" for translation could mean that Paul is specifically speaking in terms of doctrine. He stated to me that the translation, "how they are" is expansive and inclusive (regarding doctrine, life, relationships, etc...) and that is most likely the intent.

sinful world to accomplish that one central salvific work.³⁵ As with the incarnation, Paul's visitation was more than a good idea for the sake of the newly established church; it was vital. This pastoral act for the sake of the church, and today for us in our home visitations, is intrinsically attached to, and should not be separated from, the altar and pulpit found in Christ's sanctuary. In other words, there is an unmistakable liturgical element that goes along with pastoral visitation binding the people of God together. Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

"Any pastoral act that is severed from the common worship slowly but certainly loses its biblical character. It becomes an isolated act of healing, of comforting, of guiding, of ordering – a cut-flower ministry, lovely but limp. It is, of course, still useful insofar as it is done well, but separated from its biblical origins it fails to participate in the unfolding of the kerygmatic realities which builds the wholeness that God intends for his creation."³⁶

By the end of the middle ages, in the experience of the Reformers, nothing remained of what was needful and beneficial for the sake of God's people through pastoral visitation. Luther mentions the conditions of pastoral visitation being so bad that those charged with visitation, "...remained at home in a warm house and sent perchance some rascal or ne'er-do-well who wandered around the countryside and in towns, and what he heard from mean mouths or gossip among men and women in the taverns he reported to his superior who then exercised his fleecing office, scraping and skinning innocent people of their good and leaving murder and misery where there had been honor and good name."³⁷ The Church was confused, scattered, and torn. There was no connection between those who administered the Word and those who received it because the work of bringing Jesus to the masses was not taking place. We are a reflection of God's blessed gifts as He first visits us and then charges us to visit those He loves. Oden states it perfectly when he says, "God Himself becomes personally present to those in our charge, so we are called to be personally present."³⁸

The liturgy, grounded in biblical content and bound directly to the service of God toward His people, is not only fundamentally intertwined with the Divine Service, it is

³⁵ Pfatteircher, *Some Early and Later Fathers on the Visitation of the Sick*, 222.

³⁶ Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, 19-20.

³⁷ AE 40:270.

³⁸ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 171.

also, in function, how the Lord serves His people in the home or hospital room. The shape of our liturgy and its content are not based upon a specific culture or people, but rather are transcultural, meaning they easily fit the needs of every context. While each visit is unique in quality, dealing with specific individuals and needs, the biblical character of the liturgy taken into the world never needs to fit into a specific cultural paradigm. Arthur Just says, "... Lutheran worship invites us into a different world than the one we inhabit. This world gives a different perspective because it is its own unique culture... It transcends all cultures and represents no single culture because it is its own culture."³⁹ The care of souls through visitation is not the liturgy in essence but is liturgical in function. Separating the pastoral visit from the liturgical function would mean taking away what is essential to the liturgy – namely the Word of God that gives life. Paul's desire to see how the churches were faring was not for his own personal information, but rather to find out how he might continue to minister and support the needs of the faithful. So it is with our visitation today. God is piercing into the here and now ready to pour out the words of eternal life. At times, this happens with our individual communion sets in hand and Pastoral Care Companion appropriately marked. At times, God has us listen to the laments of the stranger whose soul is in deep anguish. In both situations, the Lord comes to His people through the work of those whom God has put in *that* place at *that* time. From the altar to the mouths and hearts of man, Just writes, "As we depart from the Divine Service, the gifts Christ has given us become the gifts He gives our neighbors through us, gifts of mercy, love, compassion, and forgiveness. This is the liturgy of life, nothing more and nothing less than a recapitulation of His life in our lives because we bear His presence in our bodies."⁴⁰

An Excursus on "The How"

The first section of this paper notes the different reasons why the pastor visits his people. Primary to every purposeful visitation is for the pastor to get to know those he serves and to deliver "the goods" he has been called to share. St. Paul says it this way in Romans 15:29: "I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the Blessing of Christ." For this reason "the how" of visitation also becomes very important. There are many good and practical suggestions on how visitation can or should take place. However, as mentioned earlier, we do well to stop short of prescribing a specific formula of visitation for the very reason that no two situations or contexts are ever alike. With that in mind, I would like to share a few of my own personal goals and

³⁹ Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Heaven on Earth: The Gifts of Christ in the Divine Service* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 272.

⁴⁰ Just, *Heaven on Earth*, 279.

methodology of visitations, especially those that do not include Holy Communion for shut-ins or otherwise. I wish to be clear; I am not suggesting that this is by any means the correct way of accomplishing effective visitation, but rather simply a way that I have found beneficial.

Before every visitation, no matter what the situation or purpose, I begin with a simple personal prayer usually while still sitting in my car. There is nothing particularly specific about this prayer other than imploring the Lord's guidance before the opportunity to minister to the one being visited takes place.

There is not much that has been scripted before making the visit. There might be some notable items to discuss that I have rehearsed in my head. More times than not, I like to approach a visit without a specific agenda. Personally, I feel that having a preconceived agenda binds the direction of the call too much and does not allow the opportunity for the conversation to reach beyond what I perceive to be the most significant topic for discussion. Often times the Holy Spirit leads the conversation down a different path than I ever intended. This is good because I'm convinced that we pastors know less about the sum total of our parishioner's spiritual struggles than we might think. A lot of these struggles may come to the surface while in the midst of what might be considered "common" conversation. Not only does that pastor get the opportunity to know the parishioner personally in ways that are not scripted, but also may have the opportunity to serve a need by listening to a meaningful topic they bring up.

There are, however, four things I always desire to accomplish when visiting someone's home or hospital room. First of all, I make it clear, during the general introductory portion of the conversation, the purpose for which I am visiting.⁴¹ For example, I might articulate that I'm visiting because they are new in the area and was happy to see them in church on Sunday. I might say I'm visiting because I haven't seen them at the Divine Service for a while and I am concerned about them. Or, I'm visiting because I was in the area, I was thinking about them, and thought I would drop by and see how they are doing.⁴² There are countless ways to communicate the general purpose of the visitation

⁴¹ I say "general introductory portion of the conversation" because I find it too cumbersome to stop the conversation or introductory remarks and spell out some sort of purpose and then restart the conversation where it was before. Stating the purpose while in the midst of the conversation, for me, flows much nicer into various topics that you the pastor, or the parishioner being visited, might wish to discuss.

⁴² It seems to me that in recent years a lot of negativity has surrounded the idea of unannounced calls. For certain a pastor needs to be careful and mindful if he is to employ this methodology. Personally, I believe these kinds of calls still have a place in the realm of pastoral care and, if properly and carefully used, can be effective. A pastor needs to realize that this visit will most likely be shorter than a planned visit. The visit may not even move past the front porch or driveway, but yet we dare not underestimate the true sincerity of

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that will hopefully alleviate feelings of fear or concern about what “might” be the pastor’s purpose for making a personal appearance at the home.

Secondly, my desire is to listen. After a few moments of back and forth communication, usually in the form of “small talk,” it’s time for me to focus the direction on what is more the heart of the matter and listen. I will listen to what they say and what they don’t say. I will listen for what to pray for at the end of our time together. I will listen to the intimate details of family struggles or strife at work. The kitchen table or the living room couch are sacred places of meeting for the parishioner and the pastor. This is their dwelling place. This is their place of security and, in my experience, it is also the place where parishioners are most comfortable sharing what is truly troubling their soul. Listening becomes the stepping stone from which pastoral care gets its legs. Now is my opportunity to come alongside of this child of God and articulate clearly how Jesus comes to heal the broken-hearted and bind up festering wounds. Opportunities for confession and absolution sometimes emerge, though, in my experience, not all that often. I draw comfort, however, from the hope that this will not be my last time ministering to this particular sheep, even though I prepare for the possibility that it might be by making sure I share what I hope to convey by the time the visit concludes. Listening is one of the most valuable assets of pastoral care that we have. With our ears we hear stories that draw for us pictures of what those we care for sincerely need.

After listening, and near the conclusion of the visit, comes the third thing I wish to accomplish; prayer. Because I like to pray specific petitions that include the spiritual issues brought up during the visit, my prayers are often extemporaneous. This is not to say prayers cannot or should not be thought-out beforehand; whether that is a commonly used prayer that the pastor has rehearsed or one found in the Pastoral Care Companion. Prayers found in these types of books are well worded, many in number, and often speak to the heart of the matter at hand. At times, I prefer these prayers because they give us words to pray that are clear and specific, especially when our impromptu attempts at finding the right words at the time may falter. Scripture usually accompanies my prayer either as a part of the prayer itself, or perhaps reading a portion of God’s Word before the prayer begins. Using God’s Word as a part of visitation helps keep us mindful of the liturgical flow. God speaks to us through His Word. Then, we speak to Him our hopes, needs, and desires through prayer. Now, the movement returns to us from God in the final part.

appreciation the one being called on might experience. They will know their pastor is keeping them in mind and is concerned for them.

The fourth part of the visitation is the giving of the blessing. I first learned about using a blessing as part of pastoral visitation from Dr. John Kleinig in a presentation he gave at Zion Lutheran Church in Ainsworth, Nebraska that he called "Heaven Now Open" in September of 2009. Before this time, it never occurred to me how valuable and powerful a few simple words, a consecration from the Lord that opens to us heaven's gifts, can be. Dr Kleinig states in a paper titled, in part, "Our Earthly Reception of Heavenly Gifts," presented at Concordia University in Seward, Nebraska, "We take God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with us wherever we go and show His hidden glory to the world around us."⁴³ The blessing reveals what is hidden to the troubled soul. They are enabled to hear for themselves that the Lord protects, equips, and empowers in a world that is often blind to God's goodness. Sometimes this blessing is a part of the prayer and other times it is separate. Most of the time, but not always, the blessing I use is the Aaronic Benediction, inserting the name of the person I am visiting into the blessing. I love the imagery that this ancient and liturgical blessing gives of the Lord turning His face toward the recipient and granting peace that flows directly from heaven. If possible, I speak this blessing with my hands out toward them or with my hands directly upon their head. The opportunity to touch the one being visited in an appropriate manner such as this personalizes God's Word of blessing and helps to show that this benediction is specifically for them.

In summary, visitation brings the pastor to the door of the parishioner. Then, conversation draws forth joys, concerns, and even sorrows as the pastor actively listens and empathizes. The liturgical flow in the sacred space of the home continues when prayers are offered up, imploring the Lord to intercede. Then, the full delivery of Christ is brought back to the parishioner through a word of blessing in which Jesus comes to touch lives and strengthen souls.

Acts 20:17-38 – The Encouragement

As Paul speaks to the Ephesian elders in Acts chapter 20 and recalls the work he did among the people, he is confident that such things as imprisonment and afflictions await them in the future. Paul tells the men to faithfully exercise their office as he has been faithful and guard the sheep that are entrusted to them. Then, near the end of this sermon, Paul says, "*And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified*" (v. 32 ESV).

⁴³ John W. Kleinig, *Liturgy and the Delivery of a Good Conscience; Our Earthly Reception of Heavenly Gifts; Comfort, Comfort, Ye, My People*. A paper delivered at the Institute on Liturgy, Preaching and Church Music, Concordia University, Seward, Nebraska, July 28th, 2014, 11.

The elders in Ephesus will need the Lord's power and strength to carry out their duties that come only through God's Word. Paul shares this word of encouragement as the leaders will surely face troubles that will cause many difficulties and even suffering.

"Before lifting the heavy knocker, he mumbled a prayer. He was greatly excited and aware of the rapid beating of his heart... Here Schenstedt's sister made her appearance... 'Well, well! Is our pastor honoring us with a visit?' There was just a hint of reproach in her friendliness, and Torvik felt that he blushed. It was really true that he had neglected to visit Saleby. Could that perhaps be the first reason for Schenstedt's animosity?"⁴⁴

Like Torvik in the excerpt above, we at times wonder and worry about what kind of reception we will receive when we knock on the door of the parishioner who has not received a visit from their pastor in quite some time. We tremble because they may point out how we have neglected our duty in service – even though they may have neglected their duty as a Christian by separating themselves from the body of Christ. Such circumstances expose our personal inadequacies and can even cause shame because we have not carried out this important task. However, we dare not forget that we are human pastors addressing human needs. "True pastoral care must be based on fundamental solidarity with and a closeness to real people," says Kenneth Leech.⁴⁵

Human pastors, though called to be above reproach, fall into human habits, much like those we serve. And, as that gap of closeness grows wider over time, our anxiety over what they might say if we were to call on them grows as well. However, the ministry is active. It moves from the chancel to the home and back again. It is not passive, waiting for people to come and join a Bible study or social group within the congregation. The ministry of the pastor does not sit behind a desk and wait for members to make appointments in order to talk about what troubles their hurting heart. It is true; at times we must overcome our fears and deliver the important word straight to the doorstep. But we can take consolation in the fact that we are never alone in either our encouragement or reproach. The Lord delivers "the goods" and is present and active, helping us to move beyond our deep-seated fears. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us, "...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Bo Giertz, *The Hammer of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2005), 226-227.

⁴⁵ Leech, *Spirituality and Pastoral Care*, 103.

⁴⁶ Isaiah 55:11 ESV.

The Christian congregation is made up of individuals who need individual care. They have specific needs that at times need to be addressed in specific ways. Martin Bucer says it this way:

“This is why Christian doctrine and admonitions must not be confined to the assembly and the pulpit; because there are very many people who will take what they are taught and admonished in the public gathering as being of only general application, and consider it to apply more to others than themselves. Therefore it is essential that people should also be instructed, taught and led on in Christ individually in their homes. That is why those churches have acted wisely which have retained the individual approach to teaching repentance and faith to each one who is in Christ the Lord. And those who wish to hinder all ministers of Christ everywhere from dispensing and proclaiming Christ’s doctrine not only in public and general sermons but also from house to house, to each one individually, are opposing the Holy Spirit and fighting against the reformation of the church. That in the case of St. Paul this was the work of the Holy Spirit is clear to see; and if the Holy Spirit worked through dear Paul for the reformation of his church, why should he not also work through all his other instruments who have been thus called and commanded?”⁴⁷

The spiritual needs of those we serve are best addressed quickly, not waiting for the hurting member to call the pastor and join him in his study. How blessed it is for the pastor to have the opportunity to speak directly concerning a specific sin and proclaim the medicine of life in the Gospel when the crushed sinner knows not where to turn. Brothers, be heartened by the words of St. Paul that strengthen us to take courage and be where our people need us to be at the particular time of need, even when hindrances (whether they be our own shortcomings, the parishioner’s, or the world’s) attempt to stand in our way. Donald Miller writes, “There is nothing more difficult to do than to deal intimately with people in personal relations. It is much easier to preach. Somebody once asked Gregory of Nazianzus a question. He replied, ‘I would rather answer that one in the pulpit!’ It is easier to deal with men’s needs in the mass, in the sacred

⁴⁷ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 181-182.

enclosure of the pulpit, than to face them alone in the intimate relationship of a pastoral visit."⁴⁸

Of course, the needs of the sick and shut-in are of particular priority for the pastor. We would never be more expected to show up at a parishioner's home or hospital room than when a person is ill. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "Regular visits are also good for the pastor. He should be present with the sick often... Among the sick we learn more about the world and come closer to the pangs of Jesus' cross than we do among the well. Guilt, sin, and decay are more recognizable where everyone participates in the subjection of those who suffer without any particular discernible reason."⁴⁹ Obviously, visitation is made easier when we are able to clearly see and understand the needs of those we serve. When sickness and sufferings rear their ugly head, the pastor often has more confidence in what needs to be said, or, perhaps better put, how he can get out of the way and allow God's Word of comfort to do all the work.⁵⁰ But the only way to accomplish this task is to be where the people we serve happen to be. The pastor goes where the people are to be found.⁵¹ "If our preaching is to touch and change the lives of our people, we must, like the prophet Ezekiel says, 'sit where they sit' and learn what the real needs are. Hirelings keep their distance and run from problems, but true shepherds follow the example of the Chief Shepherd who always had time for individuals and never kept anybody on hold."⁵² For the shepherd of the flock, God's called ministers of the Word, visitation, then, does not become merely a thing to do within ministry, but rather the means by which to accomplish the essence of what ministry entirely involves.

⁴⁸ Donald G. Miller, *Fire in Thy Mouth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954), 83, as found in Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 7.

⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Spiritual Care*, 56.

⁵⁰ In the novel, *The Hammer of God*, Bo Giertz tells the story of Pastor Savionius bringing Johannes communion on his death bed: "The holy words restored his confidence. Here, nothing depended on himself. Here he was simply a steward, a nameless link in the long succession of hands which Christ had used throughout the ages to distribute His gifts to men. For the first time he felt it a relief, rather than a compulsion, to be nothing but a servant of the church without any contribution of his own, and with no other glory to seek than to steward the holy heritage honorably." Giertz, *The Hammer of God*, 28.

⁵¹ Gerberding goes on to say, "The pastor as fisher must go and catch men. As a servant he must go wherever he can reach outsiders and compel them to come in (Luke 14:23). As a shepherd he must know his sheep, feed them, and seek the lost (John 10:3, 4, 14, 16; Luke 15:4; Acts 20:28). As a watchman he must warn all who are in danger (Ez. 3:17-21; Heb. 13:17). All this requires personal effort in interviewing all who need his ministrations, have no other pastor, and are in his reach. In this he must follow the footsteps of Christ." Gerberding, *The Lutheran Pastor*, 373.

⁵² Howard F. Sugden and Warren W. Wiersbe, *Answers to Pastors' FAQs* (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries, 2005), 97.

A home-going pastor will know how to give each member his portion in each season. He will not box the air with aimless words from the pulpit or even in the living room, for he knows the sheep and their needs. His people will love him and will have confidence in his preaching. They will grow in the grace of Christ and further recognize God's active work even in the midst of prodigious suffering. Many times the task of the pastor is not to relieve or take away suffering but to share in it.⁵³ Here pastoral care follows the ministry of Jesus, who "has borne our grief and carried our sorrows" (Is. 53:4). The pastor comes alongside of the sufferer not just physically with his presence, but also helping to carry the burden of affliction. In doing so, the pastor helps the sufferer see God in and through the bearing of grief and sorrow. This sharing of suffering helps the sufferer to interpret his relationship to God, recognizing that God is for him and not against him.⁵⁴ This is not to say that there is healing in the empathy the pastor shows to the sufferer. Rather, he is merely a servant of the Bridegroom and brings His gifts to those in need in the place the pastor is needed.

Not only do those who are sick and suffering need visitation, but also the careless ones of our parish who need to be "gone after, admonished, wooed and drawn to the Church."⁵⁵ We are the ones who are responsible for their spiritual well-being as caretakers of the flock to which they belong. We take counsel from the prophet Ezekiel, "*I will seek the lost and I will bring back the strayed...*" (Ezek. 34:16 ESV). Why is the delinquent not in attendance with the rest of the flock receiving the divine gifts the Lord offers? Have they been offended by a member in the congregation? By the pastor? Have they been occupied with taking care of a sick relative or has their vocation forced them to work on Sunday mornings? Are they afraid to face God because of a particular sin, or are they angry with God because nothing seems to be going right? The pastor will not know unless he makes arrangements to visit and get to the root of the spiritual problem.⁵⁶

⁵³Eugene Peterson says, "There is not a more autobiographical writing from the apostle than 2 Corinthians. Paul uses this letter to share his troubles, despair, hurt and even anxiety. His willingness to expose himself as a weak and troubled co-Christian makes the Corinthians participants with him in the life of the faith." Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, 95

⁵⁴Eyer, *Pastoral Care Under the Cross*, 74. This is from the section called, "The Skill of Sharing Suffering" and is found originally in Eugene H. Peterson, "Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work," (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing, 1992).

⁵⁵ Gerberding, *The Lutheran Pastor*, 372.

⁵⁶ John H.C. Fritz writes, "While preaching is the most important part of the pastor's duties, it is, after all, only a part. The minister of the Gospel is eminently *Seelsorger*, a bishop (overseer), a pastor (shepherd), a watchman, a man who by God has been entrusted with the cure of souls... Such, of course, he is also when in

And then we hear from the Lord Jesus within the parable of the great banquet, “Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame... Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled” (Luke 14:21-23 ESV). The Lord teaches us that His ministers are simply to endeavor to lead to His church and to the perfect fellowship of His salvation all those who wish to come, no matter how wretched and corrupted they may be – indeed, not only to lead but to urge and compel them.⁵⁷ Whether it be the delinquent member or the new family that just moved in down the street, the pastor has the blessed opportunity to meet the spiritual needs of any person, at any place, with the knowledge that Jesus Himself has commissioned His people into action for the sake of each of these needy souls. “By our Baptism we are God’s foot soldiers in the cosmic battle against the principalities and powers of the universe.”⁵⁸ Armed with the Word of God, there is nothing that the visitor cannot handle because the visitor is never alone. Whether it is our ministry to the frail, the infirmed, or the grossly delinquent, the writer of Hebrews reminds us of our Lord’s promise: “Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.”⁵⁹ Those words ring true not only for those who receive the blessed ministry of Christ, but also for those whom God uses as the givers. John Kleinig reminds us in his book *Grace Upon Grace* that our holy calling involves a regular pilgrimage from earth to heaven and then back again. The triune God goes with us everywhere in our daily lives.⁶⁰ Thanks be to God that is true!

Conclusion

George Gerberding wrote:

“Why should not a Lutheran pastor be as diligent, as warm-hearted, and as attentive to the families, children, and individuals in his reach as these others are (referring to other churches)? There is absolutely

the pulpit, but in addition he is in duty bound to look after the spiritual welfare of each one of his members. Like unto Paul he is to teach publicly and from house to house, Acts 20:20.” Fritz, *Pastoral Theology*, 172.

⁵⁷ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 77.

⁵⁸ Just, *Heaven on Earth*, 276.

⁵⁹ Hebrews 13:5. Also very applicable to visitation are verses 1-3 of the same book and chapter: “Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.”

⁶⁰ John W. Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 283.

no ground and no excuse for the difference in zeal for the individual. It is high time that all our theological seminaries lay more stress on a Biblical *seelsorge*, adapted to our land and our mixed and endangered people. We repeat what we have said before, give us a generation of ministers as apt, earnest, zealous, and active in private soul-cure, as they are sound in faith and orthodox in the pulpit, and nothing will be able to stand against our Church. No church needs such active *seelsorgers* so much as the church that has such a large diaspora.”⁶¹

Though written at the dawn of the twentieth century, these words ring true just as if they were written today. To answer the question at the beginning of the quote we say, “Yes, the pastor should be diligent.” Why? Because more visits mean more members and more offerings to fill the church coffers? No! Visitation is an authentic pastoral act that has with it the potential of reaching beyond a generalized proclamation of transgression, suffering, or even comfort. When the pastor arrives at the home and takes his seat next to the congregant or member of the community, the conversation will certainly exceed small talk or the quick reminder that we will be praying for them this week if they mention some sort of need in passing while shaking hands at the door of the sanctuary. With time and patience the *seelsorger* delves deep within the hurting soul, armed with words from the Lord that salve festering wounds and comfort hurting hearts. This is the purpose of zealous soul-care through active visitation. What joy it is to partake in the work of the Great Physician. What joy it is to be a tool in God’s toolbox accomplishing His handiwork.

At the end of Romans, Paul writes to the Christians in that place that he hopes to make a visit and enjoy their company before heading off to Spain (Romans 15:24). By this time Paul knows all too well the good and the bad of pastoral visitation. He wrote this letter on his third missionary journey, most likely from Corinth. He had already endured the difficult visits to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch (Acts 14). He was imprisoned in Philippi (Acts 16), had more trouble in Thessalonica, and was forced to stand on the hill of Ares before the Areopagus to defend the faith in the one true God while the men of Athens said of him, “What is this babblers trying to say?” (Acts 17). Yet with all that greatly challenged Paul, joy in visitation was still at the forefront of his mind and heart while thinking of the church in the cruel, pagan city of Rome.

Brothers, joy comes with the failures of visitation. We are divinely-called professional visitors to those in our churches and communities. We speak the Gospel publicly to

⁶¹ Gerberding, *The Lutheran Pastor*, 381.

people where God would have us both far and near. The Holy Spirit empowers us to speak the Gospel wherever he has placed us. “The Word of God by the power of the Spirit, grants courage to the fainting hearts. But joy in such a calling comes only through weakness.”⁶² Therefore, it is helpful for us to remember that with all of Abraham’s success, he also fails miserably at key decision-making points. Moses is the great leader of his people, but has feet of clay. David slays his Goliath, but he is able to write Psalms to comfort believers only because of his colossal failings and weaknesses.⁶³ Joy is never left alone without weakness to accompany it. But in our weaknesses come God’s great success. For, in weakness, our Lord bore up His precious children, even His called servants, who carry forth this most important task.

If failures accompany our joy in faith and life, then we can expect the same with visitation. Labors we consider failures by our own standards are not measured by God in the same way. Yet, to us, these efforts don’t make the grade. They depress us, cause us to give up, or make us feel that our works are futile. We see and hear about the successes of others and wonder why our efforts are not producing the same kind of fruit. Of course, we use the definition of success more attuned to the world, that is, results-driven success, than what God would consider success. And so because of this, we may feel even more anxious about our next excursion into the neighborhoods. However, the true joy of visitation does not come with worldly success. Jesus is the essence of the joy that can’t be comprehended with warm, fuzzy feelings or even, at times, put into words.⁶⁴ Jesus transcends our feelings, our fears, and even our failures and grants heavenly success by His own definition and on His own terms. He is bigger than our efforts to convince that family to return to church next Sunday, or that delinquent member that what he *really* needs for strength and comfort is given at the altar on Sunday morning. The joy is not in the result of the visit, what it produces in our time and heart, but rather in what accompanies the visit. The joy is found in Jesus and His presence for the sake of those we visit. The Joy *is* Jesus. Nothing could be better.

In closing, I would like to share a ‘prayer of preparation for the visitor’ listed at the beginning of an Anglican manual on pastoral visitation. This prayer puts our pastoral work into perspective by reminding us that we have no other recourse than to

⁶² Matthew C. Harrison, *A Little Book on Joy: The Secret of Living a Good News Life in a Bad News Word* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 147.

⁶³ Harrison, *A Little Book on Joy*, 148.

⁶⁴ A shut-in member of ours always tells me how much he appreciates when I call on him. He said during my last visit, “I always look forward to your visits, pastor. It brings me joy and makes my day better because you bring Jesus with you. I don’t think I can describe what you bring to me with words.” I think that says it all.

completely rely on God in this blessed and faithful duty. The prayer calls for God's servants to go to the people, yet, at the same time, rely entirely on Jesus. For pastoral visitation is truly the Lord at work.

“O Lord Jesu Christ, Who hast sent Thy ministers to open the eyes of the spiritually blind, and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God; Give me, I pray Thee, a good understanding, and a wise and faithful heart, that I may know from Thee how to speak to this Thy servant, that my words may come home with power to *his* soul, and that *he* may lose nothing through the infirmity, or inability of me, Thy minister. O Lord, grant *him* repentance unto life, and a steadfast faith in Christ, our Saviour, and now and ever vouchsafe to hear us in his behalf, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.⁶⁵

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⁶⁵A Parish Priest, *A Manual of Pastoral Visitation, Intended for the Use of the Clergy in their Visitation of the Sick and Afflicted; Dedicated, by permission, to His Grace the Archbishop of Dublin Richard Chenevix* (Oxford and London: James Parker and Co., 1868), 1.