

A Word to Sheepdogs

WINSTON CHURCHILL SUPPOSEDLY once observed: “Democracy is the worst possible form of government – apart from every other form of government ever devised.” Pastors and congregation leaders having experienced the stress generated by considering a divine call may well echo that sentiment regarding the call process as it has evolved (or is it devolved?) within The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod.

Brady Finnern, after receiving a deluge of calls in a short period of time, was moved to reflect on the impact of that experience on the souls he serves – and indeed on his own soul. The result is a fascinating blend of sound theology, careful analysis and responsible pastoral care. After a review of scriptural and confessional teaching regarding the office of the public ministry and the nature and practice of the divine call, he offers a fine capsule summary of best practices for the call process that should be required reading for lay leaders and pastors alike.

Here is sound pastoral counsel for any pastor having contemplated and declined a call – as well as any congregation renewing and solidifying a relationship with their pastor after he has declined a call. Pastor Finnern demonstrates a love for His Lord and His people in outlining how conscientious servants of the Great Shepherd can use the call process as a tool for spiritual growth and renewal for themselves, their families and the congregations they serve.

Dr. H. L. Senkbeil



Pastoral Care and the Call Process

Pastor Brady L. Finnern

*“You, O LORD, Yourself have called him, For Your precious lambs to care
But to prosper in his calling, He the Spirit’s gifts must share.
Give him wisdom from above, Fill his heart with holy love;
In His weakness Lord, be near him, In his prayers, Good Shepherd, hear him.”*

Lutheran Service Book, #681 st. 2

IT WAS LIKE A BOMB HAD GONE OFF. The Divine Service had concluded, forgiveness had been given, the Sacrament administered, the hymns sung and my sermon was above average. But you could hear crickets in the background as people walked out of church and shook my hand. I had just announced that I had received a divine call to another church. The greetings from my beloved members were sprinkled with, “You aren’t going anywhere!” and “We will pray for you,” but mostly they were visibly reserved. Once Bible study had concluded, I remember going into my office and praying, “Lord, I hate this part. Help me!”

This was the first of what has now been seven divine calls in seven years since my arrival at Messiah Lutheran in Sartell, Minn. Each call I have received since I shook the hand of my seminary president at the call service in 2006 has been a blessing, but also an emotional roller coaster. Last year

*To receive a
divine call is
not for the
weak.*

was particularly trying, as I received four divine calls in four months. Each congregation that extended a call had gone through the proper order, had prayed to the Lord of the harvest (Matt 9:37-38) and was convinced that God wanted me to be their pastor. However, after all the dust settled, I am still here at Messiah.

To receive a divine call is not for the weak. I imagine most pastors who have received a divine call go through a similar emotional cycle. When a divine call is extended, I realize the seriousness of the matter because that congregation has gone through a lengthy process of prayer, evaluation and instruction prior to making the call. The proper order has me announce this divine call to the beloved members of my current congregation. These are the people whom I have visited in the hospital, youth I have confirmed, children I have baptized, families for whom I have presided over a funeral and the saints with which I have shared some of the most precious moments of life. The next few weeks of the divine call process changes these precious relationships, possibly for the rest of my life. I evaluate all the dynamics of the call and the needs of my family. I pray for wisdom concerning ministry needs and opportunities, schools for our children, housing, salary, health insurance, extended family dynamics, moving costs and the stress of starting over. C.F.W. Walther and many other Lutheran theologians have given extensive guidance to pastors on how to best evaluate a divine call.¹ After the few weeks I decide, hoping that I am making the right decision. When I have made the declination

¹ C.F.W. Walther, *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology*. (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 474-503.

announcement at my congregation, the saints clap their hands (hopefully), maybe play a doxology, share some warm greetings after worship and, if you are lucky, a family takes you out to lunch. When the celebration is over, everything looks the same, but it seems like things have changed. The feel in the room is that the needs of the congregation have changed. It is like a new beginning has occurred.

After my seventh declination, I looked for articles concerning pastoral care after declining a call. I didn't find much. There has been much research and writing that I have read on how to begin a new ministry², how to stay healthy throughout a divine call³, evaluating the dynamics of the congregation⁴ and the benefit of a longer pastorate⁵. I have received many words of wisdom from elder pastors on how best to begin a new pastorate, how to introduce yourself to a community, how to transition a staff, how to get to know your community and ways to develop a good ministry team. However, I have heard very little concerning providing pastoral care during a divine call and after a declination(s).

² Michael J. Coyner, *Making a Good Move: Opening the Door to a Successful Pastorate*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000).

³ Bruce M. Hartung, *Holding up the Prophet's Hand: Supporting Church Workers*. (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2011); G. Lloyd Rediger, *Fit to be a Pastor*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999); Fred Lehr, *Clergy Burnout: Recovering from the 70 hour work week ... and other self-defeating practices* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006).

⁴ Peter Steinke, *How your church family works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*. (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006).

⁵ Glenn Ludwig, *In it for the long haul: Building Effective Long-Term Pastorates*. (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2002).

It all came to a head when one of the leaders of my church came to my office after the seventh decline and said, “Pastor, is there any way we can have a rest from this?” My goal for this article is to try to answer the question, “How can we as ministers of the Word and caretakers of people’s souls better apply God’s word when your congregation joins you during the emotional and trying time of a divine call and after a pastor declines a divine call?”

What is the divine call?

To define the divine call requires defining the Office of the Holy Ministry, which is a divinely instituted office focused on the public proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments.⁶ The office is not meant to be a stand-alone institution but has been created for the sake of the Gospel⁷ and only has power according to the word of God (Heb 13:7). The pastor is called to preach the word (Rom 10:17) so people would obtain saving faith in Christ by the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). He brings the word and trusts in God’s promises that it will work where and when He pleases (John 3:8), and His word will not come back to us void (Isa 55:10-11). This office is distinct from the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:9), which has been given the office of the keys to forgive sins (John 20:19-23), called to preach the Gospel (Matt 28:19) and called to serve its neighbor (Gal 5:14). However, the pastor who holds the office of the ministry is called to administer these

gifts publicly for the good and by the authorization of the congregation⁸.

The pastor is specifically charged to work with “divine” things. Johann Gerhard gives a clear description of seven duties of a man who holds the office of the ministry⁹:

1. The first and foremost duty of ministers of the church is the preaching of the word, through which the Holy Spirit is efficacious in providing inner illumination of the heart.
2. To administer the sacraments.
3. To pray diligently for the flock entrusted to them.
4. To lead their hearers with the example of an excellent life — honorable management of their life and behavior.
5. To administer church discipline.
6. To preserve ecclesiastical (liturgical) rites.
7. To care for the poor and visit the sick.

We see this office being divinely instituted in scripture as Paul was on his missionary journeys. In Acts 14:23, when Paul and Barnabas were near the end of their first missionary journey, they appointed elders (pastors) for every gathering of Christians. In Titus 1:5, Paul encourages Titus to appoint elders (pastors) in the towns where he was preaching the Gospel near Crete. Also, in Acts 20:28, Paul meets with the Ephesian elders and reminds them they were the overseers of the church of God and caretakers of their souls. Simply put, where two or three gathered in the name of Jesus (Matt 18:20), God led

To define the divine call requires defining the Office of the Holy Ministry, which is a divinely instituted office focused on the public proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments.

⁶ *The Augsburg Confession: The Concordia Reader’s Edition* (Saint Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2013), Article V, 22

⁷ Robert Preus, *The Doctrine of the Call in the Confessions and Lutheran Orthodoxy* (Saint Louis, Luther Academy, 2001), 3.

⁸ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics: Volume III*. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 440.

⁹ Johann Gerhard, *On the Ecclesiastical Ministry: Part Two*. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 100-101.

Since the office of the ministry is divinely instituted and works with the divine things of God (Gospel and sacraments), the gathering of the priesthood extends a “divine call” to a qualified man.

the churches to appoint elders for the sake of the Gospel.¹⁰

Since the office of the ministry is divinely instituted (Acts 20:28, Titus 1:5, Acts 14:23) and works with the divine things of God (Gospel and sacraments), the gathering of the priesthood (I Pet 2:9) extends a “divine call” to a qualified man (I Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). The pastor is called by God (Eph 4:8, 11-12), and his calling is considered a “mediate” divine call because pastors are not typically called like Saul on the road to Damascus. God uses the church to ensure the Gospel is preached and the sacraments administered. As Robert Preus points out, “Timothy was no less called by God than Paul himself, and so it is for every minister today (Acts 20:28; 2 Cor 5:18-20; 1 Cor 12:28). God gives the same grace, help, power, and divine efficacy to the ministry of the Word today.”¹¹

The congregation retains this right to call a pastor in a good and rightly manner as The Augsburg Confession teaches: “Our churches teach that no one should publicly preach in the Church, or administer the Sacraments, without a rightly ordered call.”¹² Melancthon writes in *The Power and Primacy of the Pope* concerning the right of a congregation to extend a divine call, “Wherever the Church is, there is authority to administer the Gospel. Therefore, it is necessary for the Church to retain the authority to call, elect, and or-

dain ministers. This authority is a gift that is given to the Church”¹³

How is a divine call typically made?

In the rite of the Installation of the Lutheran Service Book (LSB) Agenda, the presiding minister addresses the congregation, “Beloved in the LORD, through the Church’s usual order, the Reverend _____ has been called by the LORD of the Church to be pastor of _____.”¹⁴ Walther speaks about how the call must be valid and legitimate.¹⁵ So how does the LCMS ensure a divine call extended to a pastor is done in the right order, is valid and legitimate?

The biblical witness gives us several pictures of how the church selected elders in varying situations: Jesus choosing the Twelve (Matt 10:1-4), the disciples choosing a new disciple to replace Judas (Acts 1:20-23), Paul and Barnabas appointing elders (Acts 14:21-23) and God choosing pastors for the work of the kingdom (Eph 4:11-12). However, God has not laid out an exact blueprint for us to follow. In fact, the New Testament appears to be more concerned with qualifications and characteristics of the man than how he is placed into the office.¹⁶

According to Walther, a valid divine call is extended when a group of

¹⁰ Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, 42.

¹¹ Robert Preus, *Church and Ministry Today: Three Confessional Lutheran Essays*. (Saint Louis: Luther Academy, 2010), 8.

¹² *The Augsburg Confession: The Concordia Reader’s Edition* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 24

¹³ *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 303-304.

¹⁴ *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 174-175.

¹⁵ Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, 41

¹⁶ *Theology and Practice of the Divine Call: A report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*. (Saint Louis: The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, 2003), 10.

Christian believers who, together as a community, choose one to perform this divine work publicly.¹⁷ A legitimate call is one that's received without meddling from the pastor and that allows the call to come to him.¹⁸

Walther also gives detailed instructions to a congregation on how to call a pastor in a valid, legitimate and correct order. The election entails several steps.¹⁹

1. A congregation, "if possible, should seek the advice of one or more pastors who already have gained experience in the ministry, take advantage of their counseling, and entrust them with the management of the public election, provided they can be present."
2. "Every voting member," those who represent the congregation, "may suggest a candidate."
3. The eligibility of the candidates is to be discussed based on 1 Tim 3:2-7, Titus 1:6-9, and 2 Tim 2:15, 24-26.
4. The one who receives most or all the votes "is regarded and accepted as the one called by God through the congregation."

The practice of extending a divine call in the church today is quite varied from church to church and district to district; however, there is a common order from the LCMS Circuit Visitors manual²⁰ that is within the boundaries of what is considered both valid

¹⁷ Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, 42

¹⁸ Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, 47-49

¹⁹ C.F.W. Walther, *The Form of a Christian Congregation*. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 63-64.; CTCR, *Theology and Practice of the Divine Call*, 18.

²⁰ Circuit Visitors Manual, 2012, The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. p.33-39. [http://www.englishdistrict.org/sites/default/files/documents/Circuit%20Visitors%27%20Manual%20\(2015\).pdf](http://www.englishdistrict.org/sites/default/files/documents/Circuit%20Visitors%27%20Manual%20(2015).pdf)

and legitimate. When I speak of a divine call in the LCMS, I am assuming that a congregation has followed these basic guidelines:

1. When a congregational vacancy occurs, the congregation communicates with its respective district and/or circuit visitor indicating an upcoming pastoral vacancy.
2. The congregation holds a meeting with the circuit visitor and/or district president to discuss their next step concerning a vacancy pastor, call committee and granting a "peaceful release" for the leaving pastor.
3. The congregation, in accordance with its constitution, builds a call committee that works with its circuit visitor to follow the proper guidelines to assure the call is done in a good and right order.
4. Once the call committee has been formed, it asks the members of the congregation to submit names of pastors they think would be a "good fit" for their church, and those names are given to the district for additional names to be included.
5. The call committee evaluates the pastors on the list by looking at their Self-evaluation Tool (SET) and Personal Information Forms (PIF) and narrows the list to the three to five pastors they feel would best fit their congregation.
6. The leadership holds a call meeting, where the voting members join in prayer and vote on the pastor to whom they desire to extend a divine call.
7. The pastor is contacted with the congregation's divine call, which he then will spend the next three to five weeks evaluating. He announces the call to his current congregation, contacts his circuit visitor, district president and the

According to Walther, a valid divine call is extended when a group of Christian believers who, together as a community, choose one to perform this divine work publicly. A legitimate call is one that's received without meddling from the pastor and that allows the call to come to him.

district president of the calling congregation.

8. After a time of deliberation, he announces his decision to the calling congregation and current congregation.

This whole process typically takes four to six months. The call committee has spent extensive time in prayer, evaluation, joy and probably criticism. For the pastor who received the call, the difficult part is that, prior to it, the pastor and his family usually have had minimal plans of moving, of helping transition their current congregation, substantial savings for a possible move, priorities for their children's education or an adequate pastoral care plan for the souls of his church when/if he receives a call. In a manner of weeks, his whole life could turn upside down. He and two churches go through a wide range of emotions and possible changes in a month's time.

The needs are obvious when a pastor accepts a call. The churches and districts have a well-planned-out procedure to follow, though it can be emotional. But with all the emotions, spiritual questions and possible changes in a divine call process, how does a pastor who has declined a divine call faithfully care for spiritual needs of the church he continues to serve?

It has been just over a year since my last divine call, and I have sensed a new normal at home and in our church since my recent hurricane of divine calls. I couldn't put my finger on it, which is why I endeavored to conduct a survey to the souls of Messiah Lutheran Church to better evaluate the current spiritual care needs post-seven divine calls.

I determined to conduct a survey with much hesitation. A survey within a single congregation has the drawbacks of only representing a small sample, much weight is placed on one person's negative comments, the lack of an opportunity to get more feedback on responses and an obvious bias based on the congregation's view of their pastor (positive or negative). I ultimately determined to conduct this survey because I serve a congregation that is very respectful towards others and can have a tendency to not want to hurt people's feelings, so they typically do not want to share their "true" feelings publicly. To have them answer a survey would allow them to better speak of their emotions without fear of offending others. By His grace, I moved forward with the following survey.

Survey and results

On January 7, 2018, I sent a 10-question survey via SurveyMonkey.com to 77 confirmed members of our congregation with email addresses. We have a confirmed membership of 171, but many have not shared their email with us or do not use email. We also sent a request via our Messiah Lutheran Facebook page to confirmed members who were friends on that page. I announced the survey in church the day before it was sent, sent an extra email reminder, and reminded people via the Messiah Facebook page. On January 19, I closed the survey. I received 54 responses via email and 6 through Facebook, for a total of 60. The percentage of responses through email was almost 70%.

My goal with these questions was to: 1) get a feel for the emotional and spiritual issues that occur during the divine call process; and 2) to better

In a manner of weeks, his whole life could turn upside down. He and two churches go through a wide range of emotions and possible changes in a month's time.

understand the spiritual care needs after a pastor has declined a call.

Three questions were asked on how to best handle some logistics when or if I receive a future divine call. Question 2 asks, “When your pastor receives a divine call, how would you prefer he communicates this news?” After experiencing the “bomb effect” from announcing a divine call after the Divine Service, the next time I received a divine call, I sent a letter to the whole congregation, then announced it after a Divine Service. This gave members an opportunity to worship knowing the news and bring it to Christ in prayer. I did not notice a major difference in reactions and emotions, but I received some positive input from that approach compared to verbally announcing only after the divine service. The results from this survey affirm the need to announce both by mail and announcement for the sake of clear communication.

Question 7 asked, “How likely are you to respond, regarding a divine call, when your pastor asks for congregational input? The results indicated that more than 83% would be more than likely to provide input concerning their thoughts or feelings on the call. This was one of the more surprising numbers for me as I greatly value the thoughts of the saints at Messiah. When/if another divine call comes, I can confidently expect them to be honest and forthright with me during deliberation.

On January 21, I presented the results of the survey to my Sunday morning Bible study of 44 people. This meeting will be the beginning of a discussion and individual meetings to seek the spiritual care needs of Messiah over the next year. The reactions to the results were

positive, and I could feel a sense of peace because I had asked such questions. One eye opener for me was getting a glimpse of the spiritual and emotional issues that arise for a church member. As a pastor we become consumed with the details of ourselves and the calling congregation; it is easy to overlook the spiritual welfare of the church we currently serve.

The results from this survey brought the following observations that will require different pastoral care applications:

◇ **The view of the divine call is believed to be of God, but also has an increased “sociological” emphasis to ensure a good fit.**

88% of respondents saw the divine call as God using His Church to call pastors in some sense. The majority of the 88% say it is a combination of God calling the pastor and the congregation hiring a pastor that best fits their needs. These results indicate a growing desire for congregations to use hiring practices from the secular world when extending a divine call.

◇ **The greatest concern for a congregational member if the pastor accepts a call is fear of the unknown length of vacancy and the dynamics of the future pastor.**

Question 5 asked, “What is the greatest concern, if any, that you have if your pastor accepts another divine call?” Out of 51 responses, 41 (80.4%) indicated frustration and fear with the idea of entering another call process, especially when it comes to finding a pastor that would be a good fit. This isn’t surprising due to the relational nature of the Of-

The greatest concern for a congregational member if the pastor accepts a call is fear of the unknown length of vacancy and the dynamics of the future pastor.

fice of the Ministry. A pastor visits his members in their greatest joys (weddings, births, baptisms, anniversaries) and their greatest griefs (death, funerals, hospital stays). Yet, the relationship goes beyond friendly demeanor, social skills or experiences, but is a connection founded in Christ (I Cor 12:12-27) and united by God's work through His word (I Pet 2:22-23).

◇ **The fear of the unknown leads to anxiety, frustration and sadness, which affect most members when their pastor receives a call.** When asked in question 3, "When your pastor announces that he has received a divine call to another congregation, what initial emotions do you experience?" 78% said they felt anxiety, more than 60% felt sadness and more than 23% frustration. These feelings show how much of an impact the news of a divine call has on this congregation. This was further reinforced when asked about emotions throughout the call process and their feelings toward the pastor when he announces a divine call.

These feelings are consistent throughout the call process. Question 4 asked, "Do you experience different emotions, in addition to your initial emotions, throughout the weeks of the divine call process?" Of the 42 responses, 9 (21.4%) showed no changes to their feelings and 17 (40%) indicated a sense of anxiety over the decision. The results give proof of what a pastor experiences when he announces that he has a call. The first time he interacts with a member at church or in public is vastly different from the norm. The mood is respectful but more

somber, anxious and awkward. Beloved members are not quite sure what to say, and the relationship has changed. It is helpful to know that if greater than 80% have experienced a new level of anxiety from this announcement, the way we serve them as a pastor will change.

◇ **The fear of the unknown causes members to be less likely to seek pastoral care during his deliberation.** Question 9 asks, "How likely is it that you will seek pastoral care (home visits, counseling, confession/absolution, prayer) while he is deliberating a divine call? The results were the least varied of all questions: 27 (50%) were very likely or likely to come to seek pastoral care during times of deliberation, but another 27 (50%) were unsure whether they would seek pastoral care.

These feelings affirm what is commonly known as the "dead-man walking" view of the pastor during a divine call. It was obvious that people are quite conflicted during a call. One person told me that they felt bi-polar each time I received a call. One day they were comforted to whatever God had in store and the other scared at the possibility of their pastor leaving. While trying to deal with these emotions, it was revealed that it would be difficult to seek spiritual care.

◇ **Despite the anxieties, sadness, and frustration with the news of a divine call, there is also a strong dependency on God's guidance throughout the process.** Nine (21.4%) responders proclaimed a sense of de-

pendence on God throughout the weeks of a divine call by using words such as “I need to pray,” “I have a sense of peace from God” and the need to “depend on God” throughout the process.

This was very affirming that despite the anxious times, God’s word was still at work and His Holy Spirit was pointing them back to His promise to care for His Church.

Pastoral care applications

After the survey was completed, I was better able to get a glimpse of the spiritual care needs of the saints at Messiah. Based on these results and my observations over the last 10 months, my pastoral care plan for the next year is as follows:

1) Pastoral care and anxiety

The most obvious spiritual need throughout a divine call process and after a declination is addressing spiritual distress (anxiety, apprehension and fear). We all fear what we do not know, but in this case the fear is that God will not provide during a vacancy or with a new pastor. One individual expressed to me this fear because of an occurrence at another church that spent more than 18 months in a vacancy and received a pastor that was not a good fit. Although this story is real and could happen, the cause of these fears is “ultimately rooted in a lack of trust in God’s gracious ordering of the universe for the well-being of His people”²¹

The first place to point to is Christ’s promise to provide all things in time of need (Phil 4:19). When Jesus speaks the Sermon on the Mount, he proves that He will provide for the

²¹ *Lutheran Service Book: Pastoral Care Companion* (Saint Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 278.

disciples because He feeds the birds, clothes the lilies and He shares the reality that anxiety does not add an hour to our lives (Matt 6:25-30). No matter the outcome, the Church will still be the Church because of the preached Word, the grace given in the Sacraments, and the power of the Gospel.²² Christ has promised to always be with us (Rom 8:31-39), He will build and keep the church (Matt 16:18) and He will uphold us with His strong right hand (Isa 41:10-11).

These promises are the reason we pray to the Lord of the harvest (Matt 9:37-38) to provide for His church around the world. If God has instituted the office of the Holy Ministry (AC V, 33; Titus 1:5; Acts 14:23), He will provide how the word will be proclaimed to the nations (Luke 24:44-47). Even if the call process is extended or the new pastor is not quite what members would like, His power and authority come from the word (Heb 4:12) and not from any one person.

One of my goals for this year will be to uplift the scriptural promise of God’s providential care found in the hymnody. After Easter in 2018 until Reformation Day I will sporadically preach sermons and teach studies based on certain hymns from the “Trust” section in the Lutheran Service Book. Each sermon will include the scriptural foundation to these hymns and apply them to our current situation of spiritual distress.

The hymns and scriptural passages will be as follows:

- ◇ #709, The King of Love My Shepherd Is (Ps 23; Rev 7:17)
- ◇ #711, Savior like a Shepherd Lead Us (John 10:1-16)

²² Paul McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, Smalcald Articles, VIII, 281.

The most obvious spiritual need throughout a divine call process and after a declination is addressing spiritual distress (anxiety, apprehension and fear). We all fear what we do not know, but in this case the fear is that God will not provide during a vacancy or with a new pastor.

◇ #718 Jesus, Lead Thou On (Luke 12:22-32)

◇ #722, Lord take my hand and lead me (Psalm 121; John 10:22-30)

◇ #728, How Firm a foundation (Isa 41:10; Isa 43:1-7).

◇ #729, I am Trusting Thee, Lord Jesus (Isa 12:2; Isa 26:3-4)

◇ #733, O God, Our Help in Ages Past (Ps 90; 2 Cor 4:16-18)

◇ #739, Precious Lord, Take my Hand (Isa 42:6)

2) Pastoral care and trust

In question 10 of the survey, 16 people (29.8%) said that even though a call had been declined, they feared the possibility of the next call. It is a good reminder that even though we are a year removed from the last call, the congregation at Messiah sees a decline not as long-lasting relief but a temporary time of peace and joy until the next call arrives. This is understandable; after all, my congregation endured seven calls in three years. When we discussed this question at Bible study, the group agreed that if this question had been asked after my last call one year ago, the percentage would be higher.

A common response from questions 4-7 was a concern about “lost” time during the call process over those three years. I was confused at first. “What do you mean lost time? I have been here the whole time and served you faithfully, haven’t I?” However, throughout the three-year, 130-week, 7-call time-period, I spent 25 weeks deliberating divine calls. This was almost 20% of my time, which does not include the time and energy that went into the inquiries asking of my openness to a call, the time for

interviews and the time range from when a church extended a call to my announcement to my congregation.

The survey has made it obvious that the energy I spent evaluating calls hindered my time as the shepherd of God’s flock. I am not suggesting that I was unfaithful to my call here at Messiah, but it was a substantial distraction to the needs of my church, my family and my service to the community. After this realization I am finding that, in many ways, I find myself in a situation that is almost like starting over at a new church. I have many new opportunities for pastoral care without the expense and energy of a move.

These results have shown a need to rebuild trust among God’s people. To help do this, I have begun making pastoral visits that I am calling, “Stop on by.” Starting in February 2018, I have conducted an intentional pastoral visitation process with the goal of visiting all families (75) this year either at my office, a coffee shop or home. The visits are designed to be simple: Unhurried time with a snack, time to visit, read a psalm and prayer.

3) Pastoral care and teaching the divine call

The divine call brings pastors to congregations to be about His work. However, the divine call can be a confusing process. It looks like a hiring process for a business but is significantly different in that we would say that a call comes from God Himself. This call is not for someone to fulfill certain duties, but this pastor will be Christ’s representative when He preaches the word, forgives sins and administers the Sacrament. This requires consistent catechesis

on the divine call for the sake of clarity and faithfulness to God's Word.

It is also vital that we are clear on the divine call for the sake of the conscience and confidence of the priesthood of believers. If one sees the divine call as just a hiring process, it can cause a church to question whether his preaching of God's word is efficacious or if his absolution is invalid, if he is just another hired hand. Walther speaks on the importance of the legitimacy of the divine call: "Accordingly, it can hardly be overstated how important it is for the hearers to be certain of the divine call of their preacher to the ministry in their parish. If the hearers are persuaded of it, then they will also be sincerely satisfied with a preacher with lesser gifts if he is faithful. They will not leave their church and run after a highly gifted preacher but will adhere to this with simplicity: our preacher is precisely the one given to us by God, through whom God wants to lead us to heaven, and for that reason nothing that we need for our salvation will be lacking under his care"²³

It is also profitable for the pastor himself. We can all fall into the "grass is always greener" syndrome while fulfilling our daily vocations. Until another divine call is accepted, we are to be committed to our current calling and ask for the Lord to grow His Church (Mark 4:26-29). Walther states, "The certainty of the divine call in the ministry is profitable also for this that ministers (of the Church) may administer their office with greater care, faithfulness, and readiness in the fear of God and not be easily deterred. In fact, this doctrine of the call also stirs up in the hear-

ers' true reverence and obedience toward the ministry"²⁴

One pastor told me about one of his members who tended to be an antagonist toward him. One day in a conversation the member said to the pastor, "You know, pastor, there are things that we don't agree on, but you are my pastor." I believe this simple statement captures the essence of the divine call, as it shows that it goes beyond strengths, weaknesses, personalities and is grounded in the word of God and His Lord's gracious guidance.

Once I have completed my "Stop on by" visits in 2018, I have a plan to have a 4-6 week Bible study on the divine call and the office of the ministry. The extensive time during visitation with the saints of Messiah this year will help me evaluate how best to teach on this important subject.

4) Opportunities for growth in pastoral care

God also provides opportunities during the divine call process. One of the blessings I have found was the gift of self-reflection. As every pastor has a different personality, style and approach to applying God's word, the divine call process forces the pastor, in his pastoral formation, to better understand how he operates and what he needs to better serve God's people.

An opportunity for reflection came after my third divine call in 2016. In my deliberations, I realized that I needed to clarify my approach to ministry to better evaluate that divine call. I wrote a short article called, "the pastor I want to be" for the members of Messiah. The main points were based on Eugene Peterson's book,

Accordingly, it can hardly be overstated how important it is for the hearers to be certain of the divine call of their preacher to the ministry in their parish. If the hearers are persuaded of it, then they will also be sincerely satisfied with a preacher with lesser gifts if he is faithful.

²³ Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, 40.

²⁴ Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, 38-39.

God has called me and my family to Messiah Lutheran Church in Sartell, Minn. The call was valid, the call was legitimate. Until God calls me to another place, here I stand, and I am thankful to Him.

The Contemplative Pastor.²⁵ Rev. Dr. Eugene Peterson tells how he was about to resign from the ministry because he could not focus on the “Things of God.” But his congregation challenged him to be about word and prayer (Acts 6:4) while they focused on running the church. These points have helped my pastoral formation and communicate clearly my motivation and focus as a pastor as we move forward together in Christ. The article is appended below.

5) Pastoral care needs assessed through survey

As I mentioned earlier, I started the survey with much hesitation and still am not completely comfortable with the process. I found that the survey did glean insights that probably would not have been found without it. The results of my survey were not a complete surprise, but an affirmation of my thoughts from daily observations. A survey cannot be used for every inclination of a spiritual care issue. I feel like I will probably not do another survey concerning a spiritual care issue again while serving here at Messiah, but it can help when a congregation has gone through a traumatic event(s) and/or during a transition period.

Conclusion

God has called me and my family to Messiah Lutheran Church in Sartell, Minn. The call was valid, the call was legitimate. Until God calls me to another place, here I stand, and I am thankful to Him. The people have loved us through it all, they continually pray for my family and they love to hear the word of God. The seven calls I received have been a daunt-

ing, exhausting experience that still leaves everyone on edge. Members seem to wonder when they get a letter in the mail from the church, “Does Pastor have another call?” It even extends to my daily vocation as a father when my children ask every time we call a family meeting at the dinner table, “We don’t have ANOTHER call do we?”

Although the seven divine calls were exhausting, God has provided and will continue to provide for our needs. The work here requires a renewed emphasis of trusting in His promises, pointing everyone back to Christ, receiving His gifts, and asking for the Holy Spirit’s help. Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy. ❖

*“Send, O LORD, Your Holy Spirit
On Your servant now, we pray;
Let him prove a faithful shepherd
That no lamb be led astray.
Your pure teaching to proclaim,
To extol Your holy name,
And to feed Your lambs, dear Savior,
Make his aim and sole endeavor.”
Lutheran Service Book, #681 st. 1*

*The Rev. Brady L. Finner is
pastor of Messiah Lutheran
Church in Sartell, MN
pastorfinnern@hotmail.com*

²⁵ Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York, NY: Harper One), 277-281.

Appendix

The pastor I want to be...

I present to you a broad overview of my joys and motivations as a pastor. These five points are not meant to be exhaustive, but are a filter for me as I fulfill the everyday tasks of serving our Lord and you, His people.

I desire to be a pastor who:

1) Gives and receives an abundant amount of forgiveness.

We all come to the Lord in need of forgiveness from Christ. One of my main roles as a pastor is to forgive the sins of others (Luke 24:44-47; John 20:19-23), and I will also need the forgiveness from Christ to be returned to me from another pastor.

I attempt to make this a focus through finding a brother pastor to be my confessor father where I go to him on a relatively consistent basis. This has been a struggle as I have gone almost half a year since my last visit, but am always blessed when I hear and receive the blessed forgiveness from our Lord. I also have taught extensively on the office of the keys in the past and offer individual confession/absolution by appointment.

2) Spends quantity of time with his family

Unlike a majority of jobs, the pastor's "job description" is to be a good father and husband (I Tim 3; Titus 1). I've received wisdom from a pastor whose wife left him: "Spend quantities of time with your family. Quantity will bring quality." I desire to make sure that I (and you) spend lots of time with our families.

I was privileged to be raised in a pastor's home where my father would spend quantity of time with us. In-

stead of sink his time into his work, he created very clear boundaries and spent many hours doing different hobbies like maple syrup in the spring and sporting events. In our home, we struggle mightily to keep things stable with four children. Each day is a battle to ensure that we are able to provide a calmer home where our children are able to see a family that repents/forgives, has the assurance that "busier" doesn't mean better and serves in simple ways.

3) Spends quantity of time reading and studying the Bible

The Scriptures are the living and active word of God (Heb 4:12), so I desire to know the word thoroughly when I come to the pulpit on Sunday mornings and in all parts of our ministry together.

The goal of a pastor is to let the word of Christ dwell in you richly (Col 3:16) and the words of the sainted Dr. Louis Brighton ring in our ears "Brothers, you should be in the Bible 4-5 hours a day!" We struggle to be in the word as much as we should. "Lord, help us to be in Your word and be our light and path."

4) Spends quantity of time in prayer

If prayer is the time that we bring people and concerns to the feet of Jesus, what better way is there for me to spend my time as a minister of the word?

Each week I spend time in the sanctuary to pray a Psalm, praying for 10 families and any questions they have from our church, praying for family or friends of members who are inactive from receiving the gifts of Christ, praying for local community service agencies (schools, hospitals, city council, representatives, police department, fire department and nurs-

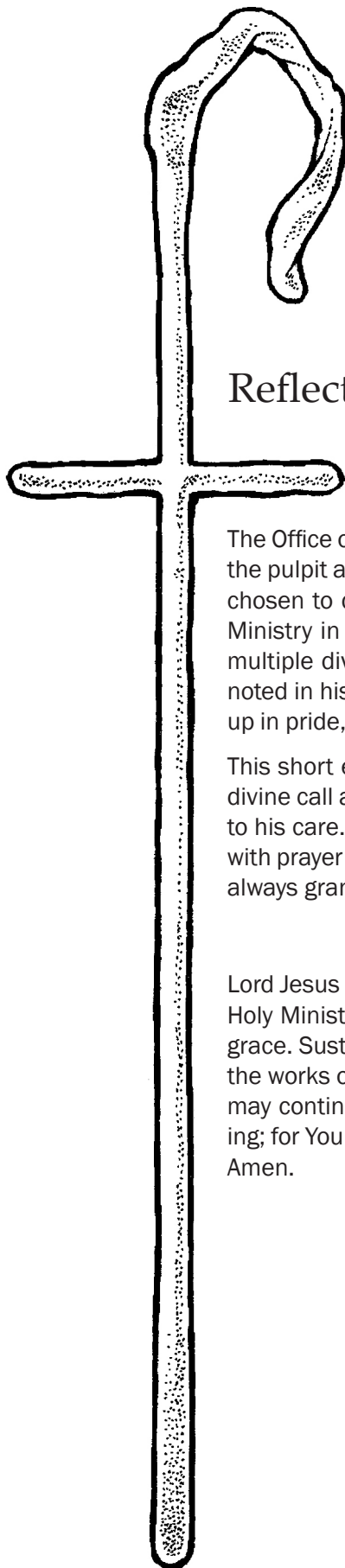
ing homes) and intentionally praying with people when the need arrives. I am not a great prayer warrior, but I'm trying each day to do it without ceasing (I Thess 5:17).

5) Spends quantity of time with one another

Part of my calling is to be a curate of souls (forgiving sins, pointing people to Christ, bringing the Word of God, giving His blessings). I desire to spend unhurried, focused time with them to bring the word of God in a practical, relational and caring way.

This year I will be working towards this goal with the "Stop on by" visitation focus. Each month I am putting up five to eight time slots for members to sign up. Within a year I should be able to visit with all of our member families and pray for God's guidance on how to address their spiritual needs. Even though I am only seven visits into the program, I am realizing the need and desire for me to do this every year.

Soli Deo Gloria (I Tim 1:15) - Rev. Brady Finnern



Reflection

The Office of the Holy Ministry is not about the man standing before the altar, occupying the pulpit and sitting in the church's office. It is about the manner in which our Lord has chosen to deliver his gifts to his people. He has so engineered the Office of the Holy Ministry in such a way to make all efforts of man to ultimately fail. Even deliberating multiple divine calls and declining them results in failure as Pastor Finnern has aptly noted in his survey and essay. A plethora of calls might lead a pastor to become puffed up in pride, but for Pastor Finnern, it has led him to see his failure to care for his sheep.

This short essay serves to ground a pastor in a like situation upon the doctrine of the divine call and the Office of the Holy Ministry as he seeks best to serve those entrusted to his care. Both pastor and people would benefit from a "stop on by" sort of visitation with prayer and blessing. Souls fed and nourished by the gifts of the Good Shepherd will always grant the health and healing he desires.

✠

Lord Jesus Christ and Chief Shepherd of souls, You have breathed out Your Office of the Holy Ministry upon unfit men whom You have made fit for the office by Your Spirit and grace. Sustain Your undershepherds with all humility and wisdom to faithfully carry out the works of joy You have set before them. Keep from them all things harmful that they may continually feed Your flock with Your pure word and sacrament unto life everlasting; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

Pastor Matt Wurm