

reflections

This is a must-read edition of *Issues*. It is my hope and prayer it will be read by every pastor and church professional in your congregation. I also hope it will be shared with boards of elders and other congregational leaders charged with caring for the workers called to be in ministry within your congregation. Caring for those called to proclaim and practice the love of Jesus Christ in our midst is a must. And, when done well, ministry flourishes. Let me share two examples I experienced during my travels this summer.

The first example is a congregation in northeast Nebraska where I preached for a Concordia Sunday. Highlights included: Seeing a projector and screen in this traditional, small town Nebraska church and having both pastor and members tell me how easy it was to get the equipment installed and how helpful it has been because folks can “see so well and don’t have to shuffle paper and books, and sermons are easier to follow through an outline and pictures which appear on the screen”; after worship a woman apologized for the noise of children in the service and then said: “I hope you didn’t mind. Before Pastor came there weren’t any children in church. Now we have young people and children again.” (I assured her I did not mind the joyful noise!); an announcement after the worship service that following the first of three meetings to raise support for *Fan Into Flame* the congregation had raised more than \$8,000 of its \$10,000 goal. The elder who made the announcement was shocked and humbled. He didn’t think that there was any chance that they would get close to \$10,000, but with two more meetings planned, they would exceed the goal.

The second is a congregation in Lincoln, Nebraska, where I was asked to preach for the celebration of the pastor’s 25th anniversary in the Holy Ministry and his 25th year of service to the congregation. The church was full, the choir and brass were outstanding, the front of the sanctuary was filled with children of a variety of races for the children’s message (on a beautiful summer Sunday), the basement overflowed for the potluck dinner following worship, and great emotion and love were evident between pastor and people. The congregation gave the pastor and family a trip to Hawaii and raised nearly double the amount of money they originally intended to raise for the trip. This dynamic congregation supports two missionaries, operates a daycare center, significantly underwrites tuition for students to attend Lutheran elementary and high schools and supports Concordia University.

These congregations model the encouragement, love and nurture Dr. Schroeder identifies as characteristics of healthy Christians and healthy churches. Both congregations seek by God’s grace and power to assist their called workers to have the kind of healthy stress Rev. Rockenbach describes. It is my prayer that congregations and workers will read, reflect and act on suggestions and prescriptions in this edition so that more people may know Jesus Christ, the one and only Savior of the world, and grow in faith, love and obedience to Him.

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Growing in Christ's Love

In the midst of a presidential election, we are reminded of how much attention is given to the intricate details of the politicians' lives and the lives of their families. We have certain expectations of these individuals who desire to run our country of how they should behave. We formulate opinions based on what the media can drum up and publish in the latest forum. We take the focus off our own lives and look at these individuals in order to escape reality and distract ourselves from our own flaws. Growing up as a pastor's kid, there were times when I felt as though our lives, actions and behaviors were the focus of the parishioners and the communities in which we lived.

"WHAT IS IT LIKE TO GROW UP AS A PK?" My initial response is that we are human, too! Labels of pastors' kids are either the goody-goody or the rebel. Admittedly, there are pieces of my past in which I played both of those roles. I recall times I compromised my father's role and ministry due to my own poor decision-making. Yet I suggest that each of us carries these attributes based on our sinful nature to rebel from God.

A pastors' family is held to high expectations to live according to God's commandments, being good examples of what God ordains. A pastor's family should reflect these standards. All Christian families should aspire to do so. Yet we also recognize that the pastor's family is confronted with the various forms of sin that every human faces. We ride the pendulum of human behavior from good to bad.

The pastor and his family are imperfect. This reality does not give any of us any excuse (as Romans 1 reminds us). Rather, we recognize our sin, admit it, and by God's grace learn to change it. Having experienced a gamut of life issues within my family and personal life, I have come to regard the pastor's family as a vessel to the congregation, sharing our common hurts, pains, and disappointments as a congregation of the redeemed. Relating to one another as sinner to sinner, we grow in Christ's love. Our behavior whether it be labeled "goody-goody" or the "rebellious" is the process of normal growth and development in the Christian life. It is important to emphasize that we are those in need of a perfect God who sent the perfect Son—to love us with all our imperfections.

"What else does your dad do besides preach on Sundays?" I was taken aback when in high school a classmate asked me this question. I suppose my shock was associated with

those times when Dad wasn't there to tuck me in at night because he was at a council meeting. Or, he would be called away from some family event because of an emergency. I am sensitive to this question because it has always made me realize that the role of the pastor is similar to many other professions. Congregational demands and expectations of the pastor regarding church growth, how worship should or should not be conducted, public relations in the community, counseling, visiting those who are ill, funerals, and weddings are issues the pastor faces in order to achieve success in his role. The toll of these expectations can create physical, spiritual and emotional tornados hovering to touch down and cause devastation in the pastoral family at any moment.

I write this to bring understanding and perspective. I write this as a request of church members to bring encouragement to your church workers and their families through prayer and loving actions. Congregations can be watching the radar which focuses attention on the pastor and family, not with criticism, but with protection and care. I encourage members of congregations to practice patience and love, not haste and hatred, in the activities of your congregation.

Synod, districts, and researchers try to pinpoint why sometimes we have shortages in young men entering the ministry. Meanwhile we, the parishioners, can guard against the burnout pastors and their families may be experiencing—by loving them the way Christ first loved us. In doing so, we can limit the heartache of having to close church doors because there are not enough ministers to fill them.

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Caring for Others and Self

Do we know how to nurture called church workers? I keep trying to reframe this question because I believe the issues are more than the caring for and the nurturing of church workers. The other side of my reflective coin is whether church workers always know how to care for and nurture those that we are called to serve.

We become church workers for all sorts of different reasons, and we remain on

these church worker journeys for many different reasons. How do we equip church workers to go on these journeys? Is this the responsibility of the colleges and/or the seminaries? Should the LCMS take on this responsibility? How responsible should the church worker and the church be for self-care and nurturing one another?

I believe that church workers and the churches we serve are in a constant state of flux in this day and age. There are no easy answers. There is no such thing as one size fits all in our society anymore. Nor can we make anyone else responsible for our actions. There is no one simple program that meets all our needs. No two churches and schools are exactly alike.

The personality of the church worker is reflected in the church. Sometimes churches get stuck in patterns developed with earlier church workers. Sometimes we church workers lose ourselves in the churches that we serve. Sometimes church workers feel like they never really became a part of the church. At other times, the church worker gets stuck in an earlier situation in his or her life that we keep repeating the same or similar actions.

The question once more is, "How do we care for and nurture our church workers?" There are many programs out there for the church worker and the church. I believe that the process starts with us as people that can be nurtured, or before we can nurture someone else. We need to know who we are, and how we function with others. We are on life journeys that can lead us in so many different directions but to one ultimate place in God's Kingdom.

Another crucial issue is how we as church workers have a shared vision with our churches and schools. This shared vision means that we as church workers are in constant conversations among the three most important families in our lives: our birth family, the family we marry into, and the virtual family we work with in our congregations. Sometimes these families overlap. At other times, these families are at odds with one another. The most important thing for us as people of God is to be in conversation with our three families.

These conversations are also key for multiple staffs and schools as we nurture and care for one another. What is our shared mission and vision? How do we have the conversations that matter to us on our spiritual journeys? Are we open enough to one another and do we trust each other enough to work together?

As we take our life-long spiritual journeys, we then turn to others who can assist us with our self-care as well as the care of our churches and schools. As I grow older, I have come to realize more each day that my health and all that I have are gifts from God. I am a steward of those gifts, and I am on a journey with the cross of Christ always in front of me.

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The Theology of Rest

As I consider the unique stresses of the called worker, how to nurture ministries and people, layers of expectations, and above all, keeping Christ at the center of life, I am stressed. Like too many plates spinning on one too many sticks, something has to give.

I can just feel it. I'm tired, I'm a bit irritable, and I don't feel like writing one more thing. I do not want to face one more meeting or visit. I'm not at the edge, but I can see it approaching. I need some time off. Maybe more than time, I need a fresh frame of reference to liberate me for a few days as I unwind and let go, while my brain decompresses.

About this time some well-meaning person wants to help me with spiritual disciplines. Don't get me wrong; I've got nothing against reading the Scriptures, praying, solitude and silence—although fasting does not work for me. My main issue here is with the word "discipline." That word alone causes me stress. Now even the main area of relief, my spiritual life, is giving me stress. It reaches a point that if someone mentions something about spiritual disciplines at this moment, that person may wind up finding out exactly what Paul meant by a "living sacrifice."

I'm going to change the name from spiritual disciplines to spiritual connecting points, relief, renewal, or some word that is much less stressful. Then I can add to the list. How about spiritual activities like napping, fishing, golfing, resting, reading, movies and hanging out with my wife. Now these are "disciplines" I can sink my teeth into. Plus, when I do these I add a whole lot of space in my life, and the Holy Spirit seems to seep in and renew my soul. I guess that's why they call it recreation or re-creation.

That brings up another interesting dilemma—am I working so I can rest or do I take rest so I can work? It seems to me that is the point of the Sabbath rest. After all, Jesus did point out that Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. So what do I do?

Often I find myself in another version of Romans 7. The rest I know that I need I do not take, no rather the work I need to rest from is what I do. Who will save me from this body stress? Sweet relief is that the answer is the same: Thanks be to God for the victory in Jesus Christ.

If God's glory and the proclamation of the Good News is the point of my vocation, how come it wears me out? Besides, for someone who can preach the Gospel in a sermon, how come I lead such a Law-oriented life? Think about it. Living up to unrealistic expectations, and then actually accepting that as the measure of personal worth, add to that the guilt that follows when everything doesn't get done! Sure sounds like Law to me. The Law always accuses.

Interesting that Luther points out that in a regenerate person everything that he or she does is God's work. Even when that involves the treating of oneself to a great meal, walks around the block or sleeps, all of it is doing a good work and God-pleasing work at that! It's not just hard stressful labor that pleases God, but our rest pleases Him, too. Walther goes so far as to say that if Adam had remained in the state of innocence in which he had been created, he could have spent his life doing anything he pleased: fishing for trout (I need to stop here; Walther has a list of activities, but my eye can never get past the trout part of blessed activities). All his doings would have been good and holy works, and there would have been no sin in them.

Think about it: God is as pleased with me when I fly fish as when I preach the Gospel, each a holy work. So how do you view your rest? Does guilt gnaw at your soul and in your brain when you're on vacation, reminding you of what you didn't get done and whom you forgot? When you take two days off next week instead of one to read or walk or golf or bike, does this seem unholy to you? Or, can you respond to those special requests with a simple, "Sorry, I'm doing holy, God-pleasing work for the week; it will have to wait."

Rest is a part of God's good and gracious plan for you and me. Rest is yet another gift of re-creation from the cross. Maybe it's time to reexamine your list of disciplines

and see if there is room for a few more restful ones. Yours may be different than mine, but I know what they have in common: space, recreation, renewal, connection with God and connection with friends, and they all make God smile.

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