

RICK MARRS

## What Does a Congregation's Call and Promise of Supporting a Church Worker Mean?



• Illustration by Charlotte Kaeding •

ISSUES

In C.S. Lewis' classic book, *The Screwtape Letters*, a more experienced demon is instructing a novice on how to tempt the man for which he is responsible. Early in their correspondence (the second letter actually), Screwtape writes to Wormwood: "One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is the half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local barber with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands ... When he gets to his pew and looks around him, he sees just that selection of his neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided."

Are we tempted to view "Church" through worldly eyes? Do we see people we would normally like to avoid? Do we think of church as a club of like-minded people who happen to come together to sing and do religious things? Do we see carpeting that we would not have chosen or dust that the janitor missed again this week? We Americans so easily fall into the mindset that our faith is individualistic, that it is just between "me and Jesus," that we forget that the people around us are members of the Body of Christ, fellow digits of His hands here on earth. We believe in His forgiveness for us as individuals, but do we regularly seek to "forgive those who trespass against us"? Do we see and appreciate the Church invisible "spread out through all time and space" that puts fear into the boldest demons?

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How are we tempted to view our pastors and other church professionals? Screwtape doesn't bother to describe how limited the local church's pastor or teachers might be (at least not until Letter XVI). Do we feel like we are listening to an underwhelming motivational speaker? When a baby is being baptized or the Lord's Supper is being distributed, do our minds drift away to "more important matters" of home or business? Do we ponder "How much are we paying this pastor to do what seems to be a mediocre job of motivating this congregation (or classroom) to perform more efficiently and enthusiastically? How expensive are their benefits?" If these thoughts are wandering through our minds more than just occasionally, we should stop to consider whether someone like Wormwood is excitedly writing to his superior about his latest success. Whenever we find ourselves distracted from the wonderful and powerful, yet often invisible, Gospel of Jesus Christ by the visible issues of church kitchens, carpeting or workers' salaries, we may want to go to the church's sanctuary and/or pastor for confession (and, of course, absolution).

### What Does "Support" Mean?

Foundationally, a congregation's call and promise of supporting a church worker should start from a spiritual and theological basis. Many of our congregations' members and leaders come from the mindset of their own vocations, be that of large corporations, small businesses, farms, government or military work experience. All of those experiences have their own stresses, including competition, weather, limited funding, even bombs exploding nearby for some of our military. All of these vocations have their temptations (but we won't review all of Screwtape's strategies here). Pastors and other church workers have many of the same stressors that come with those other vocations (we pray that exploding bombs will not soon be a stressor in our American churches, but they are in other parts of the world). But church workers have the additional stress (with accompanying joy) of striving

to remember that what they are doing will have and does have eternal consequences—and that whole hosts of demons, worldly temptations, and sinful flesh (both our own and that of others) are working behind the scenes to undermine our vocations. I often told my former parishioners, church leaders and shut-ins that I coveted their prayers. I knew that if they were praying for me, they were interceding in powerful ways (James 5:16b: “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working”), AND that they were remembering that my vocation had stressors that were invisible to them—and to me. We need to ask, “How can laity consider that the treatment of their church workers is an integral part of ‘hallowing God’s name among us’?”

### Using Scripture and Catechism as our Guide for Understanding “Support”

Scripture should always guide us to know what God’s will is for our good works. But which Scripture should guide us when considering what supporting a church worker means?

Luther wrote *The Small Catechism* early in the Reformation. In the preface to *The Small Catechism*, Luther very undiplomatically rails against the pastors in the region for not attending to their duties. He had made visitations to the surrounding villages and found “deplorable, miserable conditions” in which the pastors/bishops had not even taught the parishioners “the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments.” He strongly admonishes the pastors: “Oh, you bishops! How will you ever answer to Christ for letting the people carry on so disgracefully and not attending to the duties of your office even for a moment.” Unless Luther was speaking only in hyperbole, it appears that the spiritual condition of the churches around Wittenberg was worse than any LCMS congregation I’m aware of. In this admonishment Luther does not threaten to have the princes boot them out of office or reduce their salaries. He instead writes the *Small* and *Large Catechisms* and exhorts that they teach, pointing them to the scriptural teachings that they should hold central.

The “Six Chief Parts” made up the first version of *The Small Catechism*, but over the years other parts were added. Some of these additions may have been written by Luther himself, but it is also possible that he delegated these sections to others during his lifetime (Luther, like other pastors, did not have to do *everything*). They include sections on prayer, questions to prepare for the Lord’s Supper, and the “Table of Duties: Certain Passages of Scripture for Various Holy Orders and Positions, Admonishing Them about Their Duties and Responsibilities.” *The Small Catechism’s* Table of Duties lists 13 different “holy orders and positions”: Pastors, hearers (laity), civil government, citizens, husbands, wives, parents, children, workers, masters/supervisors, youth, widows, and “everyone.” The section titled “What Christians ought to do for their teachers and pastors” appears to have been added around 1540. While this particular section was not included in the *Book of Concord*, these verses have been included in our German and English version catechisms for many years and are part of our Lutheran ethos. Let us use them as the central scriptural teachings to guide our considerations of what a congregation’s call and promise of supporting a church worker means.

### Support as Income

The first two passages in the section, “What Christians Ought to Do for their Teachers and Pastors,” are:

- *1 Corinthians 9:14*. In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.
- *Galatians 6:6-7*. One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.

These two verses emphasized by the catchism focus on the need for church workers to be fairly recompensed for their efforts to proclaim the Gospel. Ironically, the context of the 1 Corinthians 9 passage is Paul’s emphasis that he personally does not receive material support from the Corinthians or other congregations. However, he emphasizes

that normally an officially recognized Gospel “proclaimer” should be supported in heralding the Gospel. The Lord commanded that this is their right, even if Paul opts not to claim that right. While we do not have these explicit words of our Lord Jesus Christ recorded in the Gospels, we do know that He made similar statements (cf. Luke 10:7; Matthew 10:10).

The Galatians 6 text has a similar essential message as the 1 Corinthians 9 passage, but Paul ratchets up the force in Galatians. In English, if we desire to speak in the imperative mood (“Do this”), we can essentially say this only in the “second person” (“You do this!”). In Greek, there is a “third person” version of the imperative. Many common translations into English soften this emphasis with phrases like “Let the one who is taught share ...” (NASB). The ESV more closely matches the force of the passage with “One who is taught must share.” Paul is effectively saying, “Share what you have with your catechists,” but he is doing so in the third person. He ties this statement with strong words of admonition: “God is not mocked.” Writing to all of the Galatians at once (the Greek also has a second person plural, “you all,” that we use only in colloquial southern English), Paul warns them that they will be deceived and be treating God with contempt if they do not adequately share their income and belongings with their pastors and teachers!

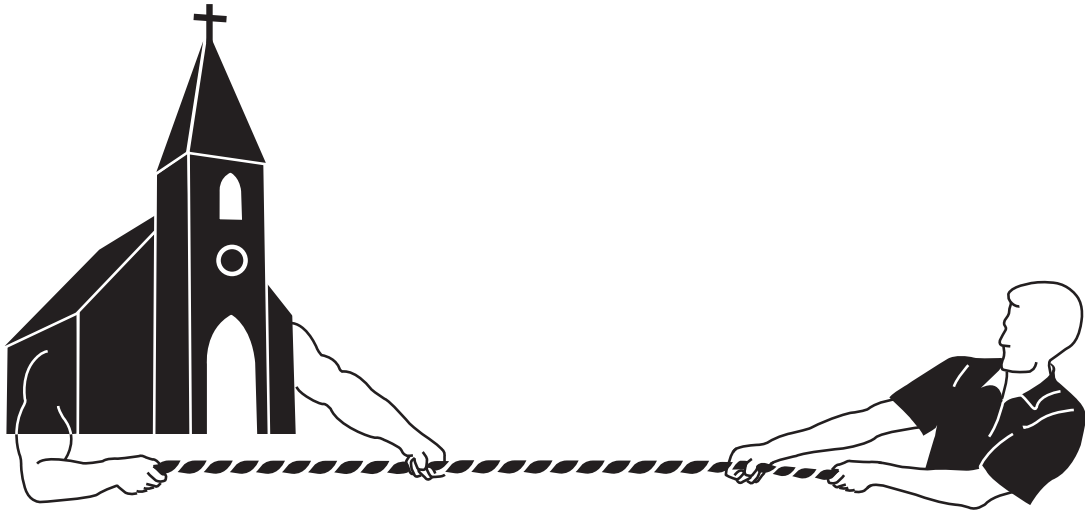
But what is “adequate” sharing? We all know of TV evangelists who live in multiple mansions. You may even know of local (hopefully non-Lutheran) pastors who live lifestyles that are much more extravagant than nearly all of their parishioners. A more normal guideline for LCMS congregations is that the pastor and other church workers should have pay packages somewhere on par with the average of their church leaders. This would seem to be an equitable and faithful way to consider “sharing,” but it would require church leaders to be open with each other about their own incomes. Districts often try to give guidelines to congregations in the form of “District Pay

Scales.” These can also be very helpful, but readers should not get so focused on “District Pay Scales” and the rising costs of “benefit packages” that we fail to consider that pastor and teacher salaries are part of our own faithful response to the Gospel.

It should be noted that church workers run risks with their salaries, such as unwittingly basing their sense of success or reward on their salaries or size of congregations. Luther’s words in the closing paragraph of the Preface to *The Small Catechism* speak directly to this view. “So look to it, you pastors and preachers. Our ministry today is something else than it was under the pope. It has become a serious and saving responsibility. Consequently it now involves much more trouble and labor, danger and trial, and in addition it brings you little of the world’s gratitude and rewards. But Christ Himself will be our reward if we labor faithfully. The Father of all grace help us to do just that. To Him be praise and thanks forever through Christ our Lord. Amen.” (page 252).

### **A Note about Debt Load**

In our culture students often run heavy debt loads to finance their college and graduate school plans to enter a vocation. In some professions, for example, medical doctors and lawyers, high debt loads are not as critical because their higher incomes allow former students to pay off their debts. But pastors and other church workers will never see those high incomes, and generally they have incomes lower than other “professional” occupations. Congregations, districts and other support agencies should consider how to help church workers manage and pay off their debt. I know of several districts and congregations who have set up specific endowments that are used to pay off indebtedness over a multi-year period such as ten years. Such endowments can be structured to increase each year, therefore financially encouraging new church workers to stay longer in their first congregations. Unfortunately, many of these endowments are underfunded and reimburse workers for only a fraction of their overall indebtedness.



### Support as Honor

When, at age 39, I told my parents that I was planning to leave my college teaching position and was contemplating attending a seminary to become a pastor, they were surprised, even though they knew I had considered being a pastor during my teens and early twenties. My mother's response was: "Honey, are you sure you want to do this? You know how many congregations out there are mistreating their pastors." She was concerned for me, my wife and our children. A district vice-president once told me that being a pastor now is a lot like being a high school basketball coach in Indiana. The coach knows that he knows a lot more about what he and his team are doing, but he also knows that everyone in the stands thinks that he or she knows more about what the team should be doing than he does.

In too many congregations in our Synod, the relationships between church workers and congregations are strained. Many may not even understand how the relationships between church worker and congregation should work. Our culture tends to teach us about the relationships in some vocations, such as between boss and worker, owner and employee. In other vocations, the boss is expected to interview, hire the best available candidate, and then communicate job expectations. The boss then evaluates job performance and makes decisions about retaining, promoting or firing the employee.

If the company is doing poorly financially, even well-performing employees may have to be laid off. Often, these performance reviews are thoughtful, objective and well-planned. Sometimes they are capricious. In our representative democracy, we elect some people to their vocations, and those whom we (the "majority") believe will do the best job are placed in office, at least until the next election or until term limits restrict continuing in office.

But in church worker professions, the roles are different than in other vocations. Who is the "boss"? Who is the "employee"? Who does the performance review? On what basis? If this vocation stems from an office that a group of people "elected" them to, can they rightly be recalled from office by casting a ballot?

The problem with asking such questions is that they imply a worldly understanding of how the Church and the local congregations that make up that Church should operate. Most people realize that the Church is not a business or a political party. But is it a "not-for-profit" private agency? Is it a voluntary organization with enough similarities to a business or government agency that it is somehow dependent on our human skills to function?

We Christians must be constantly reminded of how unique the Church is in the world. Our perception of pastors and other church workers will be inextricably tied to our perception of what "church" is.

The Church is *NOT* a volunteer organization of like-minded religious people. The Church is the people of God whom the Holy Spirit has called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified in the one true faith. Our interrelationships, our treatment of each other then must be guided by beliefs and virtues counter to our secular occupational fields.

The final verses in this subsection of *The Small Catechism* emphasize how pastors and other church workers are to be treated within the Church. Three passages from Scripture which are cited are:

- *1 Timothy 5:17-18*. Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and "The laborer deserves his wages."
- *1 Thessalonians 5:12*. We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.
- *Hebrews 13:17*. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

The emphasis is not on American values like fairness, rights and freedom. The emphases are on the honor, respect, esteem and love that should be shown the worker by the congregation. (By extension, these verses should teach church workers the importance of honoring, respecting, esteeming and loving one another, but perhaps that should be left to another article.) These virtues are what bring honor to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and His life-changing Gospel. When outsiders sense the respect and love that Christians have for their leaders, this will build up their leaders' reputations and the reputation of the Church as a place of love and respect, opening doors to a Gospel witness.

First Timothy 5:17 is another example of the third person imperative in Greek being "under-translated" into English. The force of this grammatical construction is

more like "Be doubly honoring of the elders who rule well, particularly those laboring in preaching and teaching." The meaning of "rule" is also important. The Greek word translated "rule" (*proisteimi*) should not be considered synonymous with "administering." Rather, the Greek carries more of a connotation of "caring for" rather than "efficiently leading." The leaders "rule" over the congregation not as a CEO seeking to make the organization run more efficiently, but as leaders who deeply care for the members as parents do for children (cf. 1 Timothy 3:4, 12). Paul uses similar concepts and some of the same words in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, but near the end of that sentence he ratchets up his persuasiveness even more. This verse can be translated "Esteem them *as earnestly as possible* in love because of their work."

### Why Honor Church Workers?

Why do we esteem pastors, teachers and other church workers as earnestly as possible when their work—at an earthly level—may not always seem as polished as the reporters we watch on the nightly news? We esteem them in love because their work is bringing us the good news of the Gospel, which continues to reconnect us week after week with our Savior who gave Himself for us. Lutherans do not see the Gospel as information that changes our lives once and then we are "good to go" for the rest of our lives. Instead, Lutherans understand the need for daily repentance and forgiveness and that the Gospel—Word and Sacraments—is medicine that we constantly need to be protected from ourselves, the world and the devils like Wormwood and Screwtape. The principal way God has chosen to bring us that medicine is through the very flawed voices and hands of those we call to be pastors and teachers of the church.

The last verse listed in *The Small Catechism* subsection being examined is the only passage not written by Paul. However, the author of Hebrews concurs with the apostle. The first word of the verse "obey" (*peitho*) is a commonly used verb in the New Testament,

but in nearly all other contexts it is translated “be persuaded by.” “Be persuaded by your leaders” is perhaps a more clear translation for our American ears that do not like to be told to “obey” laws and rules. But the rationale for this “persuasion” is a bit different than for Paul. The author of Hebrews emphasizes that the reason we should submit and be persuaded is “Because they themselves keep watch over your lives as those who will give an account.” The public ministry is just that, very public. It can be like that Indiana high school basketball coach who knows that he has the whole community looking over his shoulder. At the end of the season the coach probably will have to give an account of his and his team’s performance to the principal or school board (or even the community gathered at the barber shop, as in the movie, “Hoosiers”).

It is probably good that pastors and teachers give an account of their performance to their elders and school boards, seeking their feedback on how their performance could be more God-pleasing. But ultimately they will give an account of their stewardship of God’s gifts to their Lord. Pastors and other church workers know that their Lord is forgiving (or else we would never enter this vocation), but yet we want to respond to His love with a performance that pleases Him. With each worker having particular gift-sets that are stronger or weaker, we should constantly be striving to improve ourselves as preachers, teachers, theologians, administrators, evangelists, and spiritual care-givers. Honor shown to church workers does not come because of their stronger gift-sets, but because of the gift of the Gospel they are bringing to the church.

The author of Hebrews then concludes this section by instructing Christians to behave in ways that bring joy, not groaning, to their leaders. To burden their leaders with grief and grumbling is of no help to the congregation and is even harmful in their mission of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

October is “Pastor Appreciation Month” in the USA. My heart was made most joyful

several years ago when many of the members participated in a Christian radio station’s “Pastor Appreciation Month” program. Several church leaders took me to an appreciation luncheon sponsored by the station. Many members had written notes to the station about what they appreciated about me as their pastor. I kept many of those notes in a desk drawer, as well as many other thank you notes that came to me through the years. When I was having a tough week, I would open that drawer and read through a few of those notes to be reminded of their appreciation and to have the joy of serving them be revived just a bit. I still keep those notes in a box in my office at the seminary. Parishioners who remember to thank their pastors and teachers, highlighting specific deeds that they have found spiritually helpful, will help increase the joy of their church workers’ vocation.

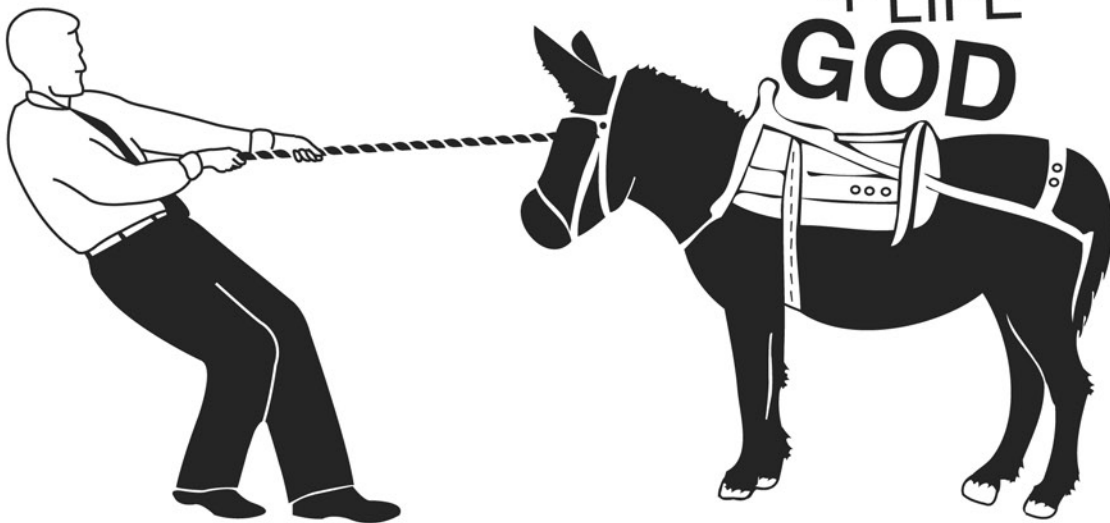
In Letter XVI from Screwtape to Wormwood, the senior demon describes the one ongoing strength of the ill-equipped pastor in his “patient’s” village: “But I must warn you that he has one fatal defect: he really believes. And this may yet mar all.” May every congregation be blessed with pastors and teachers who “really believe” in Jesus Christ. May that be the “fatal defect” for the demons who are tempting us. May church members also consider how they treat their pastors and other church workers, both financially and personally, not as American employees, but as messengers of the light of God’s grace which they bring to the Church.

ENDNOTE. The author of this article is aware that it is necessary, on rare occasion, to remove professional church workers from their positions. The Synod spells out the following guidelines: “Called ordained or commissioned ministers may be removed from office in Christian and lawful order by a two-thirds majority ballot vote of the voters’ assembly for one of the following reasons: persistent adherence to false doctrine, scandalous life, willful neglect of the duties of office, or the inability to perform those duties.” (from the Guidelines

for Constitutions and Bylaws of Lutheran Congregations, May 2006). If a called worker is released from one's call for one of these reasons, congregations are still called upon to administer church discipline procedures in Christian love in the light of Galatians 6:1: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." (NIV)

**References**

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 Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* published by Crossways Bibles, 2003.



• Illustration by Charlotte Kaeding •