

The Small Town

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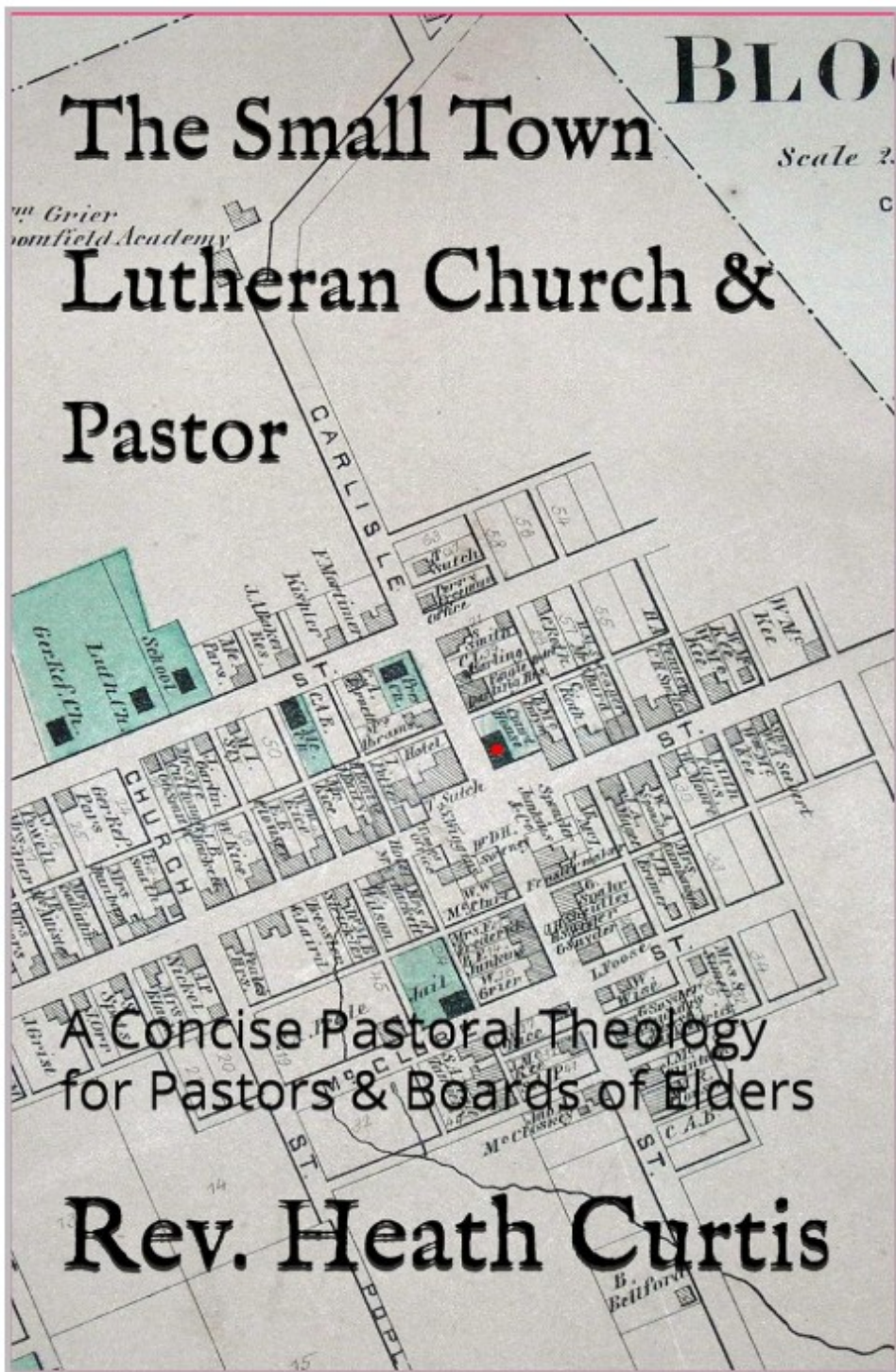
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Lutheran Church & Pastor

A Concise Pastoral Theology
for Pastors & Boards of Elders

Rev. Heath Curtis



The Small Town
Lutheran
Church & Pastor

A Concise Pastoral Theology for Pastors and Elders

Heath R. Curtis

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DEDICATION

For my former summer vicars and seminary fieldworkers and the congregations they now serve. One of the real joys of my ministry and of our congregation's life has been your energy, friendship, and service.

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A pastor's training doesn't stop with seminary. For my ongoing education in pastoral ministry I'm chiefly indebted to my faithful group of elders here at Zion and Trinity and to my circuit brethren from the Metro East.

Special thanks are due: to the brothers who first reviewed this little book and offered suggestions; to Jack for his editing services; and to my wife, Rebekah, for setting down her thoughts on being Frau Pastor.

PREFACE

This little book aims to do two things. First, it's meant to be of use to my former fieldworkers and summer vicars and the congregations they now serve as pastors. If I can repay some of the debt I owe them by passing on the lessons that can only be taught by experience, then that will bring me joy. Second, this book is simply a love letter to small town America and the Lutheran churches that serve there. So it's also meant to be of service to any pastor who serves a small town church, perhaps especially to those who come to that culture as an outsider. While this book often speaks from the perspective of the pastor, I've also tried to make it useful for elders and other lay leaders. For a congregation to thrive, the pastor and lay leadership have to be pulling in the same direction. I hope this little book can be of help in that regard.

Over the past nineteen years, I've had the special privilege to take part in the fieldworker program of Concordia Seminary – St. Louis as well as having several summer vicars from Concordia Theological Seminary – Fort Wayne. This little book about small town churches and pastors is dedicated to them. While some of our fieldworkers did vicarages in urban or suburban settings, every single one of them ended up in a small town setting once they got their first call. That's not surprising since at least 60% of Missouri Synod congregations are small town churches. I cherish the time I get to spend with each of these young men who are training for the ministry: their energy and zeal have been a real blessing to our ministry here at Zion and Trinity.

As I've gotten older I've realized just how much having fieldworkers and vicars is like having children. For one thing, it keeps you young! When I started here in Worden, my fieldworkers were less than a decade younger than I was. Nearly 20 years on and now they are about the same age as my oldest children. There are other similarities as well. I rejoice in watching the careers of the men who cut their teeth in ministry here at our parish. Their successes reflect well on our ministry here at Zion and Trinity and we can't help but take some pride in seeing them

flourish. When they suffer hardship, when they must bear a cross, when tragedy strikes them: my congregation and I mourn and grieve like parents who feel the hurts and heartaches of their children deep in their own hearts. And like all parents, once the children whom the Lord entrusted to you for a time have grown and are off on their own, you realize how much you never told them.

That's what this little book aims to do. I want to pass on to these dear brothers in the ministry and to their churches the lessons I've learned along the way in two decades of service. A lot of that learning came from making mistakes and learning to eat humble pie. If I can save them a serving or two of that bitter dish, I will consider the effort well spent.

But this book is not just for these dear brothers in ministry. It's also for any pastor or board of elders, or any Lutheran at all, who loves their small town church and would like to see it thrive under the Lord's grace. Our small town churches today face a lot of difficulties. But I wouldn't want to serve anywhere else: I love the life the Lord has given to me and my family here in our small town and parish. A big part of the desire to set all this down on paper is simply to say "Thank you" to the people and places that raised me and to the congregations I still delight to serve. If nothing else, I hope that the readers of this book will sense and appreciate the gratitude I feel toward small town America and the small town Lutheran Church. Perhaps you will also be blessed by comparing notes with a pastor who has served a couple of decades and has the gray hairs to prove that he's made enough mistakes to have learned a thing or two about ministry under the Lord's grace.

Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, 2025
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1 WHAT IS A SMALL TOWN?

Just about everyone in America grows up thinking that they are “middle class.” The people with noticeably more money than you are “rich.” Those with noticeably less money are “poor.” In their own eyes, these two groups almost certainly consider themselves to be “upper middle class” and “lower middle class.” I suspect that something similar is at play when it comes to living in a small town. Human beings like to break things down to manageable proportions. Even if you are from New York City, you probably think of yourself as being from a given neighborhood in the Bronx. You didn’t grow up in Chicago: you come from Brookfield or Cicero or 95th Street.

The government has their own definition of what it means to be from a rural area or a small town. It’s based on factors like size and isolation. If your town is over X number of people, it can’t be a small town. If it’s too close to a mid-sized city, no matter how small it is, your town can’t be considered small.

However you slice it, the Missouri Synod is overwhelmingly Midwestern and located in small towns. More than 60% of our membership lives in the twelve Midwestern states. At least 3500 of our 5800 congregations fit comfortably within the government’s definition of a small town or rural community. Even more will fit into the definition that I will use for the purposes of this book.

A small town is a community with its own identity and just one public high school (or none at all). According to government statistics, this community might be called a village, a town, a township, or even a city. The size of such a place will vary

WHAT IS A SMALL TOWN?

widely. At the low end, a town can be so small that it effectively does not have its own identity: just a gathering of a few old farmsteads. Places tend to lose their sense of community without at least a few of the following: post office, bar, police force, drug store, gas station, public schools, local radio station, grocery store, a locus of employment (grain elevator, manufacturing plant, etc.), community parks, and restaurants. There are plenty of communities with just a couple hundred residents who have the sense of common identity that comes from sharing and maintaining a handful of things from this list. The combination of just a bar and a post office can maintain this sense of community. There are also plenty of communities with three hundred or more residents who lost this sense of being their own place once the last bar closed up shop after the grocery store and the post office had departed years ago.

At the high end, a community that becomes so large that it needs more than one public high school is starting to lose the feel of a small town. This is because “small” in this sense really means “human-scaled.” In small towns everyone knows everybody else: at least at the family level and at least potentially. For the town to retain its sense of human-scaled unity, there needs to be some way for this potentiality to be instantiated. How is it that you might possibly know everyone? *Because you went to school together.* Either you personally went to school together, or you played in band with their sibling, or your dads were on the football team back in the day. Once that unitary community is broken up by the lack of any real chance of being mingled together, the town is too large to be a small town.

The government is correct to figure isolation into their definition of a small town. No matter how few people live within the borders of your village, if you are connected to a larger metropolis, you will not have the same kind of community identity as a small town. If you are from the suburbs, you are not from a small town. This is true even if you are from a small suburb with at least something of a self-identity. McCook, Nebraska, with about 7,000 residents is a small town. McCook, Illinois, with just 300 residents is not: it’s just part of Chicagoland.

Over the past five decades many small towns on the edge of metropolitan areas have been slowly transformed into suburbs. This always involves a loss of identity due to the loss of human-scale. Elkhorn, Nebraska, was once a small town. They had a strong sense of community and were a perennial contender in Class B football. Yet as the wider Omaha area grew, so did Elkhorn. Long before it was officially annexed by Omaha it had ceased to be a small town. Yet still today, there are folks in Elkhorn for whom it still *feels* like a small town. This is because they don't really acknowledge all the influx of new people that eventually just made them part of Omaha. I've even talked to old timers from St. Charles, Missouri who think of their community as a small town. Anyone who has driven on I-70 would disagree: today there is nothing to distinguish all the physically connected communities from St. Peters to St. Charles to St. Louis to the Mississippi River. I bet a lot of folks in Lake St. Louis still think they live in a small town. Maybe they still do (I doubt it). But not for long in any case.

I was born in a small town (Hastings, NE). I started school in a different small town (Beatrice, NE). I attended a couple years of middle school in a town that was on the cusp of losing its identity as a small town (thirty-five years on and Loveland, Colorado, is now just part of The Front Range along with Ft. Collins, Greeley, and Longmont; even poor Windsor has been gobbled up). Most of my schooling, including high school graduation, occurred in the same place my parents grew up: McCook, Nebraska. To this day when I'm walking through an airport wearing a Cornhuskers hat and someone comes up to me and says, "Go Big Red!" I reply with my part of the liturgy, "Go Big Red! Where're you from?" He might say Lincoln or Columbus or Scottsbluff. My reply is always, "I'm from McCook." A small town is a place you can be from. It sticks with you. Its identity is part of you, and you are part of it.

I've spent nineteen of my twenty-one years of ministry serving in a small town. No pastor knows how long he'll be in one place when he signs the call papers. But it wasn't more than a couple

years after we landed in Worden, Illinois that my wife and I knew that we loved this place. It's the classic "great place to raise kids." Being the pastor here is an honor and I cherish my calling. Small town life is different from life in the suburbs (where I spent my first two years of ministry) or the city (where I went to seminary and grad school). This book is for pastors who are taking a call or serving in small town America. And it's for boards of elders (or any other church leadership) helping their pastor thrive in their small town congregation. If you are a small town native like I am, I hope that you will enjoy comparing notes and trying to examine yourself and your community from a slightly different viewpoint. If you are such a connoisseur of small town life, you've probably already found a few things to disagree with in just these first couple pages. Social commentary is never straightforward. If you are headed to a small town, or already serving there, as someone who grew up in a different culture (a city boy, a kid from the suburbs, a guy who grew up truly isolated on a working ranch or as a missionary's kid): then this book is especially for you.

Whether you are reading to compare notes on a topic you love or you are looking for a survival guide for what is to you a foreign mission field, I aim to give you straightforward assessments of what small town ministry is all about. I'll be honest and I'll try to be fair. But I can't promise to be unbiased: I love these communities. I'm really glad I'm from McCook and that my kids are from Worden.

2 THE SMALL TOWN CONGREGATION: CHARACTERISTICS, CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS

If your congregation is in a small town setting, it is almost certainly a small town congregation. *Almost certainly.* There are exceptions. Some places are *sui generis*, so unique that they will transcend the scope of this book. A well-known example of this in our Synod is St. John's in Seward, Nebraska. Seward is a lovely example of a small town in every way, but it is also more than a small town: it's a college town. As such, Seward transcends a lot of small town discussions because each August it grows by more than 20% as the kids pile into the dorms; then in May, they head south on Hwy 15 or west on Hwy 34 and Seward shrinks again. St John's, in turn, transcends many aspects of the small town congregation: it's full of professors, it's very large, it has a huge staff, the district office is right down the street, etc.

The typical small town congregation is of average or smaller size. But what does that mean? Are we talking about baptized membership? Confirmed membership? When it comes to understanding the workings of your parish, the most basic statistic is actual worship attendance.

So what is average attendance? As of November 2023, the percentage of Missouri Synod congregations broken down by weekly worship attendance looks like this:

50 or fewer	31%
51-99	37%
100-250	21%
250+	11%

More than two-thirds of our congregations have fewer than 100 people in weekly worship. The average size of an LCMS congregation is somewhat larger than for Protestants in general, but it is still 26% lower than it was twenty years ago. In my work with the Synod in stewardship over the past decade, I have had to learn these demographic statistics inside and out. They present a stark reality for all of American Christianity, including the Missouri Synod. In 2018 CNN ran a big story about this decline. No matter how you divide up the American people demographically (by sex, generation, geographical area, income level, education, or race), Christianity is on the decline and “No Religion” is on the rise in each and every category. At the time that article was written in 2018, the American populous was equally divided between three religious groups: 23% each for Roman Catholic, Evangelical Protestant (LCMS, SBC, PCA, etc.), and No Religion. Six years on from CNN’s deep dive and America’s plurality religion is None at All.

Small towns in the Midwest have been especially hard hit by this demographic reality. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the majority of our membership lives in these states and the majority of our congregations exist in these small communities. So we feel this in our bones. Folks in the small town congregation will say things like, “I remember when we used to have twice as many confirmands each year as we do now.” Or, “Look at all the gray hair in the pews!”

The Four Problems You Will Face

In my travels around the Synod speaking on stewardship and demographics, I hear this again and again. In fact, when I ask laity to list the difficulties in their congregations, four items come up so often that I can conduct a little parlor trick. First, I hand a closed notebook to someone in the crowd before asking people, “What are the challenges in your congregation?” Once we have them listed on the whiteboard, I ask the person entrusted with my notebook to open it, and sure enough, the same list had already been written down:

Declining and older membership

Finances

Volunteers (the 80/20 Rule or even the 90/10 Rule)

Inactive members

I've traveled around the Synod from California to Connecticut and from Texas to North Dakota (and *everywhere* in the Midwest in between) and this same list is repeated over and over again. If you are headed to or serving in a small town congregation, you can count on having this list of difficulties. None of them are insurmountable, but all of them are real. You need to acknowledge the fact that they are real and that your people feel them in their bones even if they have never articulated them. Some of them can be faced head on and some of them call for a change in perspective. All of them must be faced with the Church's only weapons: the Word of God and faith in Christ Jesus.

Declining Membership and Making Disciples for Life

When it comes to **declining and aging membership**, what your people need most is a pep talk: *This is happening to everybody! It's not a problem unique to our congregation or Synod. It's all over America (and the world). We're not a bad church or bad people or a bad pastor. This is bigger than us, but we can get through it together under God's grace.*

This pep talk should lead to action in the parish under God's grace. What should the people of God be doing in the face of these huge national (and international) trends. There is something that each and every congregation, big and small, rural and urban, can do in this regard: **discipleship**. This is the chief task of each congregation: raising Christians in the faith, strengthening them with the Word, instilling them with lifelong piety. Here is another statistic that illustrates the power of discipleship: if the Missouri Synod confirmed every child we baptized, and everyone we confirmed stayed as an active member, we would already be a growing denomination!

So what makes for strong discipleship? We could approach that question by asking which religious groups do the best job in making lifelong disciples of their members. We have good data on this from the Pew Research Council. What religious groups have the highest numbers for retaining the folks they raise in their faith into adulthood? Hindus (84%), Jews (76%), Muslims (76%), Greek Orthodox (73%), Mormons (70%), Roman Catholics (68%). The number for the Missouri Synod is about 60%. This is a good starting point, and we can do better.

I would contend that these retention statistics are largely about **identity**. How important is your religion to your self-identity? Lutherans have a lot of strengths here: the distinctives of Lutheran worship and hymns; a strong sense of belonging and community; multi-generational churches, schools, and colleges. But it's also the little things, the cultural markers that remind me, "I am a Lutheran," things like saying *Come, Lord Jesus* before supper and reading *Portals of Prayer* every day.

Congregations that want to buck the societal trends of declining faith need to focus on **discipleship, which means leaning in to our Lutheran identity**. So think through the life of a member in your church. Map it out. What are the big events in the life of a disciple that can be marked out and highlighted and used as a time of teaching and firming up Lutheran identity? Baptism, first day of Sunday School, first day of school, first day of confirmation class, confirmation day, entrance into youth group, etc.

Clearly the church can't raise disciples without teaching parents their God given duty to "raise their children in the fear and instruction of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 6 and Ephesians 6). For far too many years I struggled with how to get parents to take this task in hand. I would encourage them to do devotions at home. I printed a version of Concordia Catechetical Academy's *The Congregation at Prayer* each week in the bulletin. After some years of being frustrated with the (lack of) effectiveness of these exhortations and plans, it hit me: I was encouraging parents to do something they simply didn't know how to do. I wasn't giving them instruction in actually how to do it. I was printing a resource

that was good, but not actually teaching them how to implement it in their homes. And what if a family missed a Sunday when these sheets were passed out? In such a case they would not have the prayer sheet and memory work for the week. This prevented folks from ever really getting into the habit of using it.

After noticing my failings in this regard, I've developed a system that works well. Now we print up a booklet each year for every family of the church to use in daily devotions which includes the week's memory work from the Catechism and Bible and, on the facing page, a set of instructions for how to use *Portals of Prayer* for family devotions. This *Family Devotions* booklet is handed out each year in August at our "Back to School Sunday." To help encourage its use, directly before I begin the sermon each week, I have the confirmands "repeat after me" with the new week's memory work from this book. The first year we did this, I only printed up enough copies for the confirmand families. But after several members without confirmands asked for a copy, we now give them away to everyone each year. It's become the cornerstone not only of our confirmation program but also for ongoing catechesis of the entire congregation. It's very affordable to print up as well (send me an email for the files and you can print it up for your congregation too).

Financial Struggles in the Congregation

When it comes to **finances**, it is important to recognize two things. First of all, this is a hard topic. In my workshops on stewardship, I start the day by meeting with a group of circuit pastors. Toward the beginning of my time with them I ask them to play word association: shout out the first thing that comes to mind when I say *stewardship*. The answers are things like: *money, guilt, ugh, at-a-loss, legalistic, and self-serving*. Sometimes an especially pious man will say *opportunity* or *generosity*. But in general, that's how we pastors feel about this topic. Especially in a small town, the bit about stewardship feeling *self-serving* hits close to home. Everybody knows where my paycheck comes from, so how on

earth can I talk about people supporting the church with their offerings more generously?

Would it surprise you to learn that when I play the same word association game with the laity, I get the same list? It's exactly the same except for the bit about stewardship being self-serving for the pastor. The people really don't think that way and they are surprised to hear that we pastors are self-conscious about it. But otherwise, it's the same list. So is it any wonder that finances are difficult in small town parishes where neither the pastor nor the people really want to talk about what the Bible has to say about the topic (even though it is listed right there in the Small Catechism's Table of Duties)?

So that's the first thing that needs to be said about financial struggles in the small town parish: it's a tough topic. I've already alluded to the next thing that needs to be said: we need to find the solution to this problem in the Word of God. For over a decade that is what I have helped pastors and congregations across the Synod do. The answer to this problem is simple, but not easy (isn't so much of life like that?). The one and only faithful stewardship plan is to teach what the Bible says, ask the people to do that, and then plan accordingly. Since this is a big, difficult, and pressing topic, I will dedicate a later chapter to discussing it in greater detail.

Lack of Volunteers: The 80/20 Rule

The small town congregation runs on **volunteers**: Sunday School teachers, trustees, choir members, elders, the Ladies' Aid, etc. Such service is getting harder to find. I don't think this is because "kids these days" don't care about their church. The 80/20 Rule has always been with us, and I think the percentages still stand. If it feels more difficult today to get volunteers than it did 20 or 40 years ago, the reason is not that Lutherans have gotten less service-oriented. Rather, the reason is that as the generations have changed, so have the ways in which people prefer to give their service.

Most of our congregations have constitutions that were written by and for the generation that won World War Two. When my grandpa got back from the European theater, he *joined* things: the card club, the LLL, Good Sam's, the YMCA, the bowling team, the CB group, etc. This was a generation of *joiners*. Their kids (the Boomers) seemed to revolt from all this joining in their youth, but as they settled in to middle age, they more or less made their peace with it. But my generation and those behind me, the generations who are today's parents of school-aged kids, simply don't want to live like that. For whatever reason, folks in their 30s and 40s today simply do not want to make long term commitments to go to meetings or serve in an office for years at a time. They feel uncomfortable and unable to commit to being somewhere every single week for a year (Sunday School teacher, volunteer youth leader, choir member) or every month for three years (committee members of any stripe).

We can complain about this, or we can realize that our church constitutions are not the Bible. We can change these arrangements to serve today's church members' expectation and desires for service. What does this look like? Some offices you will absolutely have to keep: men will need to step up and commit to being elders and trustees. That will be easier if the other forms of volunteering are filled in ways that make sense to today's parenting-age members. The trustees you do find probably won't be the kind of guys who get together every Saturday at the church to do all the little things that need to be done on an ongoing basis. But if you create an online signup for a big Parish Fix It Up Saturday, you'll get more than enough help. And that help will be happy to be there and they will make great memories that day. You might even think about this more flexible, sign-up based approach for filling the role of Sunday School teacher. Have a training day for a pool of Sunday School teachers in the late summer, and then let those individuals sign up for individual Sundays online.

Above all: *ask your potential volunteers how they would like to serve!* They will have other ideas akin to those I've just mentioned. Once you've gathered those ideas and tried them out, think about

changing your congregation's constitution to reflect how your membership wants to get the work of the church done in today's world.

Delinquent or Inactive Members

The last of the Four Problems you are sure to face as a small town congregation is a **membership roll whose majority will be made up of inactive members**. The only exceptions to this rule that I am aware of are recently planted congregations who have made policing their membership rolls part of their congregational identity from day one: *our members are those who actually go to church; if you don't really want to come to church, then you don't really belong on our rolls*. The vast majority of established small town congregations have fallen into a different pattern: *once you are on our rolls, you are a member of our church and will stay on those rolls, even if you don't come to church much*. Your congregation's constitution will have a section that talks about attendance and self-exclusion, but I can pretty much guarantee that it has become a dead letter. Nobody in your small town church is going to be happy to kick their neighbors, cousins, siblings, and children off the rolls just because they only come to church a couple of times a year.

Small town church members and pastors tend to feel badly about this list of delinquent members: *why don't they like to come to our church? How can we get them back?* Early in my small town ministry I got the elders behind a plan to really reach out to the delinquents. We called, wrote notes, and visited in person. We would do the visits on Sunday afternoon. It kinda sorta worked, for a while, for a few people. Some people would show back up to church after a visit...for a week or two. At the end of the year-long experiment, I had a burned out board of elders and a wife angry at her lack of family-oriented Sunday afternoons. I also had a delinquent list that was exactly the same as when I started.

I suppose I had gained something: all the ammunition I needed to enforce the letter of our constitution's law. We could have moved forward with removing all those folks from the rolls. There is an argument to be made that this is the best pastoral

practice. On the other hand, *summa lex, summa injustia est*: maybe enforcing the letter of the law would do more harm than good. I could debate both sides in my mind and see an argument for each. But it didn't really matter which side of the argument I fell on as the pastor, since there was no doubt which side my small town *parishioners* fell on: we were not going to "clean up the rolls" and toss their family members to the curb.

In frustration, I finally did what I should have done from the beginning: seek advice from a more experienced pastor. I called my father-in-law who had spent over twenty years in one small town parish and I asked him, "What did you do about the delinquents at Cross?" He said that they had tried everything over the years, but toward the end of his stint at that parish he came up with a new idea. He sent a mailing to every inactive member. The mailing included a picture of a funeral scene: a casket with pall bearers. Under the picture he hand wrote, *Is it going to take six strong men to bring you back to church?* My father-in-law's analysis of this program: "That didn't work either!"

Much like the situation concerning volunteering, what is needed here is a change in perspective. You would pay real money if I could provide you a list of evangelism leads for your community that included names, addresses, and phone numbers of people who will be ready to hear the Lord's call in a time of need. That's what your "delinquents" list really is. These people are in need of repentance. They are sinning against the Third Commandment. They are not prioritizing their lives around the First Commandment. If there was anything that you or your church could say to convince them to repent, then they would have repented long ago. They will need God to call them to repentance through an experience in their lives. And when God does that, you and your church will be there. When the doctor gives the bad diagnosis, when the sheriff pulls up to the house in the middle of the night with news of a car crash, when the marriage breaks down, when any of a hundred happenings get people to think about what really matters: then these "delinquents" will be ready to hear what you have to say in the name and by the command of your Lord Jesus Christ. So hold on

to their names and addresses. Always be inviting. Communicate with them regularly. But don't beat yourself up about the fact that they don't much come back to church. They need a bigger call to repentance than you can give. Just be ready to minister to them when that call comes.

Who Are These People?

If you were heading out to the foreign mission field you would prepare yourself by studying the people you wanted to serve with the Gospel. You would learn their language, their history, and their culture. You would want to know what makes these people tick. Small town America is its own culture. Fortunately for you, there is no need for you to learn a foreign language. (Although the regional dialects may be different: is it pop or soda where you come from? How long is the "o" in "sorry" or "boat" when you pronounce it? Can you hear a difference between "tin" and "ten" or "pin" and "pen" or "bag" and "beg"?) Yet small town Americans do have their own assumptions, manners, and *modus vivendi*. If you are a native to small town America, this culture makes up part of who you are. Since it's the water you swim in, you may not have ever really thought about it. If you grew up in the suburbs or the city, this culture will be foreign to you. In either case, as you set out to minister to small town Americans, you should study their culture just as assiduously as you would if you were boarding a plane for an overseas mission.

I can sum up how we small town Americans (and especially Midwestern small town Americans) view ourselves in two words: Competent and Conservative.

Competence

Our first child, a daughter, was born while I was on vicarage. It was a pretty typical first-child birth experience. We made it to the hospital in plenty of time. My wife had several hours of labor there in the L&D room. At last, a beautiful daughter was welcomed into the world (while I was supposed to be preaching

on Christmas Day). Number Two, a son, came much more quickly, but we made it in time. The next two labors were induced. No problems.

Then came Linus. When my wife awoke with labor pains at 4 o'clock in the morning she assured me that there was time to take a shower and double check that the overnight bag was packed. I called the lady from church who was set to watch the older kids. She got there and when she saw my wife, she gave me a wide-eyed look that said, "Why haven't you left yet?!" And still my wife, an experienced mother of four by this time, went through the instructions for caring for the rest of the kids and hugged and kissed the bigger two goodbye while I tossed the luggage into the van. We were a whole seven miles down the road before she said, "We're not going to make it."

Thusly did I become, like St. Adam before me, a midwife. Linus was born in the front seat of a Honda Odyssey on an Epiphany morning that topped out at 9 degrees. The ambulance pulled up after I had reached for my Carhartt jacket as swaddling clothes. Later that day my wife's analysis of the whole situation boiled down to this: "I'm so glad we made it out of Worden's fire district."

If we had not made it those seven miles down the road, it would have been an elder from church driving the ambulance, with his nephew (the head usher) in the back warming blankets for Linus. A few years later I was not so lucky when a gallbladder attack brought just these men to my door to take care of me.

If anything is to get done in a small town, the people themselves must do it. They must be *competent* for every situation and emergency. In New York they can idolize the NYFD for their professional heroism on 9/11. In small town America, the community simply *is* the fire department. They don't get paid a government salary or pension for their work. They are volunteers who take their own time to get trained for the task. They wear a radio on their belts at all times in case a neighbor is in need.

In the suburbs you might decide to take up local politics as a hobby or a calling. In a small town you might just have to take *your turn* on the town board, as a village trustee, or as the county

road commissioner. Don't know much about building roads? Too bad: the work needs done so somebody has to learn to do it. *It's your turn.*

Do you like live entertainment? Then you'll have to start a community theater.

Want to see first-release movies? Then maybe you'll have to be like Julesburg, Colorado, or Imperial, Nebraska, where the town boards created movie theaters *ex nihilo* and town board members take turns running it.

Sick of having your brother-in-law stay at your house when your wife's sister wants to visit? Is he sick of it, too? Do you both wish your town had a hotel? I once gave a presentation in a small Iowa community where the only hotel was owned and operated by the village because no chain was going to open the 6-room hotel they so desperately needed. They saw the need and they did it themselves.

In small town America the people do what must be done. Thus they develop a strong sense of their own competence. The work in a small town is too important to be left to the professionals. It has to be done, so we will figure out how to do it.

If this culture is foreign to you, the people's insistence on omnicompetence might grate on you quite a bit. A buddy of mine who grew up in the Kansas City suburbs and landed in rural America for his first call *bated it*. He was complaining to me about his small town parishioners and how they were excessively independent. They didn't care about what went on elsewhere. And they certainly didn't want a pastor who would tell them what to do as an expert in theology. If he got too uppity, they could pray at home, after all.

He went on in this vein until I couldn't control my laughter anymore. "Welcome to small town America, brother!"

Since then he's gone on to make his peace with my culture and my fellow small town Americans. He even turned down a call to a suburban Milwaukee congregation to stay with his small town parishioners. But it was definitely a change in cultures that he had to adjust to.

For the small town pastor the lesson is this. **To be a pastor, your people need to respect you.** In a small town, no respect can be earned without some measure of visible *competence that goes beyond your daily job description*. My parishioner who is the local fire chief drives a truck for a living. His nephew, the EMT in the back of the ambulance, works for a landscaping company to earn a paycheck. The county road commissioner in the township where I go hunting is a hardscrabble farmer. My dad is just a meat cutter: and he's also a village board member. *Your parishioners will not be impressed with your competence as a pastor*. Of course you are good at being a pastor: you were trained and educated to do that. *What else have you got?* We were all trained as truck drivers, landscape engineers, and meat cutters and yet we are also fire chiefs, EMTs, and village board members. *So what else have you got, Pastor?*

To be a pastor that people will accept in small town America, you need to demonstrate competence beyond your daily calling. This doesn't have to be extravagant, but it must be real and in some sense physical. My father-in-law is a city boy from Kansas City and a theater nerd to boot (as he will readily admit!). To earn the respect of his first parishioners in small town Iowa, he found it necessary to maintain a sizable vegetable garden: that was a competence the people could respect. My ability to hunt, fish, and shoot handguns earned the respect of my parishioners. But your competence can be anything, so long as it is sufficiently *real*. My father-in-law probably could have stuck to theater: a friend of mine in rural southern Illinois did just fine among his parishioners after they saw him in a production of *The Music Man* in the next town over. Can you play the guitar, the cello, or the accordion? Then you possess a competence small town Americans will respect. Do you run 5ks, paint watercolors, or maintain a 10-shot handicap? You are good to go! Can you shoot pool, throw darts, or brew beer? The people will be impressed. But for the love of all things holy: just don't tell your elders that your only hobbies are *reading* and *studying theology!*

Conservatism

Small town Americans are conservative in the truest etymological sense of the term: *they like what they are used to*. They are protective of how things have always been done. They are suspicious of whatever they perceive as innovation.

This will have some overlap with political conservatism, but the Venn diagram is not even close to being a circle. My paternal grandmother was a true conservative. That's why she voted for Bill Clinton in two consecutive elections. And it's why she voted for Jimmy Carter and LBJ before him. She always voted for Democrats because that's what every farmer in southwestern Nebraska had been doing since FDR saved the family farm. In her mind there was no contradiction between her pro-life church and voting for Bill Clinton: both were the conservative thing to do, the thing that had always been done. Mothers had always cherished their children, not killed them. Farmers had always voted for the party of the little guy, not those fat cat Republicans.

Of course there is something to criticize here. Perhaps small town conservatism does take Chesterton's Fence a bit too far. But give credit where it is due. Chesterton was right after all: if you want to make a change, you had better be able to explain to me in great detail why the *status quo* exists and why it really needs to be changed. I like what my parents and grandparents have given me. *Why should we do anything different today, Pastor?* The implications for this for any pastor who wants to recover and restore historic Lutheran teaching and practice should be clear. I'll revisit this in a future chapter when it comes to worship practice.

The Unwritten Rules of Small Town Parish Life

Your congregation will have a written constitution and you should read it before you get there. It's important for any community of human beings to have clear rules for how they relate to each other. It's also true that there are always unwritten rules as well. Whatever your church's constitution says in black and white, there will also be unwritten assumptions that shape the congregation's life together. Here are a few of those assumptions that I've seen in small town congregations across the county.

- The pastor and elders lead the church.
- The shut-ins need to be visited by the pastor once per month.
- The sermon is about 15 minutes long (and not 16).
- Barring a real health emergency, you will serve at least three years in one place before you can ask to be on a call list.
- The pastor is the last one out the door and shuts off the lights after a parish event.
- The pastor is the biggest fan and cheerleader of every congregational endeavor/program/institution whether that is a school, an auction, a dinner, etc.
- The congregation gets a two-for-one deal with the pastor and his wife: she also has a big role to play as a servant to the congregation.
- No transferring between parishes within the circuit without very specific reasons. The validity of this rule is proportional to the density of the Lutheran population.
- It's pedantic to get upset about Matthew 18 when people go to the elders with a concern about the pastor...as long as the elders are forthright in sharing the concern with him.
- Pastor makes hospital calls and parishioners call him at any hour if there is a health emergency.
- Pastor gets two Sundays off a year. Maybe more once he's been there a while.
- Everyone is related to everybody else by blood or marriage or long-standing friendship: tame your tongue and explain everything in the kindest way!
- The pastor and/or his wife will be both friendly and available when they are out and about: they will stop and talk in the grocery store, gas station, etc.

- Not all the leaders and stakeholders of the congregation will hold elected office. They still need to be involved in big decisions.

Each of these is probably worth its own essay, and I could go on listing more. Maybe some of them don't exactly line up with your experience, but the wider point is valid: there are a set of unwritten rules and expectations that you need to be picking up on. They will vary a bit from place to place, but you can be sure that they will be there. Be on the watch for them and be sure to articulate them clearly between pastor and elders. Nothing is more prone to lead to conflict and disappointment than the pastor and elders operating with a different set of unwritten rules!

Notice the Water You are Swimming In

Foreign missionaries understand the importance of gaining familiarity with the local culture. When you move from one continent to another the differences in culture are impossible to miss. Going from the suburbs or an urban environment to small town America is also a change in culture, though the changes will be harder to notice since they will be masked by similarities in language, clothes, politics, and architecture. But make no mistake: small town America is its own culture with its own set of assumptions, customs, and manner of life. A wise pastor will become a student of this culture as he seeks to bring the Word of God to these competent, conservative, kind, fallible, sinner-saints in need of a Savior.

3 THE SMALL TOWN PASTOR

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has a long history of producing well-trained, professional, caring, intelligent, hard-working, faithful, orthodox pastors. Our ministerium has a good reputation in the wider culture of American Christianity. Your seminary training and professionalism will be respected not only by your parishioners, but also by the other local Christian clergymen, and the banker, the mayor, the chamber of commerce, etc. Everyone knows that Missouri Synod pastors know a lot about theology, believe the Bible is the Word of God, work hard to serve their people, care about their communities, and are natural leaders.

All of that is true in small towns as well. But there is another list of expectations and assumptions that comes with ministry in the specific setting of small town America. This chapter will examine some of those expectations and how a pastor might want to navigate them.

The Small Town Pastor as Leader

When I was attending Concordia Seminary – St. Louis, there was a series of classes titled *Pastor As* _____. I took *Pastor as Counselor*, *Pastor as Teacher*, and *Pastor as Leader*. There were others as well, and we used to joke that everything was offered except *Pastor as Pastor*. But that's the point behind this set of classes: it's hard to summarize the pastor's job because it is so multifaceted. I think this challenge is increased in the small town church which tends to be a church with fewer than 100 folks in the pews on

Sunday morning. In a larger church with a larger staff, a pastor can usually specialize in a few areas of ministry. In my first call, I was the assistant pastor for “evangelism and assimilation,” while the senior pastor was the “administrative pastor.” There was also a Director of Christian Education who oversaw the confirmation program. The small town pastor usually has to wear all these hats himself.

One of the most challenging roles that a small town pastor must take on is that of leader of the parish. The culture of small town churches presumes that the pastor takes a large role in leadership and yet shares that leadership with the elders, congregational chairmen, and other lay officers of the parish. How is all that navigated? What exactly is the pastor’s role in leading the parish outside the worship service and the classroom?

I think it is helpful here to think about the metaphors for pastoral leadership and figure out which one is most applicable to the small town/small parish setting. In the worship service the pastor *is* the preacher and celebrant. At the death bed he *is* the confessor and comforter. Those things are not metaphors, but descriptors. They describe what the pastor is doing in a given setting. The title we use for the man who does all these things is *pastor* which is a more general metaphor: a *shepherd* of God’s flock. The Bible also calls Christ’s ministers *overseers*, a metaphor that is frankly from the world of politics and business. My first call out of seminary was to a large suburban parish with a school, a senior pastor, assistant pastor, DCE, and a separate preschool. This congregation had a lot of moving parts! The senior pastor in that setting had to manage professional staff, attend multiple business meetings, and was himself accountable to many different boards. In such a place, the *overseer* metaphor not only fits but also can’t help but take on a modern American twist: my senior pastor’s job really did look like the role some of his parishioners were fulfilling during the work week as *CEOs* and *small business owners* as they *oversaw* operations.

In a majority of small town parishes, the pastor will be the church’s only professional staff. Some small town parishes have schools as well, but the role in the typical small town church-

school setting definitely has a different feel from that large suburban parish where I first served. So while the small town pastor will have some overseer roles, that doesn't feel like the controlling metaphor for pastoral leadership the way it might in a big congregation with lots of moving parts.

Being a small town pastor brings I Timothy 3 to mind where St. Paul says that a pastor should be the husband of one wife who maintains his children well because, "if a man does not know how to lead [προστῆναι] his own house, how will he care for God's church?" When it comes to leadership in a small town church, it is usually most helpful to think of the pastor as playing the role of *head of house*. This doesn't mean that a pastor should be paternalistic, looking down on his members as mere children. Such an attitude won't survive long in any parish, and especially among the competent and conservative people of small town America. Pastors will find their lay leadership to be experienced, wise, skilled, and pious. So what does the metaphor from I Timothy 3, the metaphor of a father leading his house, look like in such a setting? In view of this Bible passage, I have always found it helpful to think of the relationship between pastor and people to be like the ideal relationship between a wise father and his grown children. My wife has three siblings. All four are happily married with families of their own. All of us (the four Gilbert kids, the four in-laws, and the grandkids) all respect Grandpa, ask him for advice, and really listen when he speaks.

No metaphor is perfect down to the last detail: that is why we call them metaphors and not descriptors. So you can't take this metaphor too far. But it has greatly helped me when it comes to pastoral leadership. Like a father dealing with his adult children, I need to respect my members if I want them to respect me. I need to realize that I must convince them of the truth, not order them around. I need to persuade and advise and encourage. Sometimes I may even need to chide and sternly warn, but that will be far more effective if it is rare.

When I sent this section to a friend (who also serves in a small town) for his review, he had this to add: "I often find I'm also the *coach* in the locker room during half time and we're getting our

butts kicked. Pep talk, we can do this, remember the fundamentals, stay the course, don't give up, it's painful but it's worth it. They often feel like they're losing and they're tired. They need to hear that this is the time and place God has called us, so we need a hands-to-the-plow mentality." I like my friend's analogy of pastor-as-coach: that also rings true. Maybe you've got your own favorite analogy for the pastor's work as leader in the small town parish. No matter how you think of it, pastoral leadership is an inescapable part of ministry in a small town church.

The challenges, crises, conflicts, and opportunities of leadership in a small town parish will be varied. A small town pastor will have to counsel people in the midst of family conflict. He may need to lead a parish through a capital campaign to renew a property or build a new worship space or school. He will for sure have to teach confirmation class, help people pick up the pieces after a broken marriage, and teach them hard lessons about the truth of God's Word. If you are ever stuck on what to do in any of these situations, you should pray for wisdom first, and then it might be helpful to ask yourself, "Now what would a wise father or an experience coach say or do in this situation?"

The Small Town Pastor About Town

A good friend of mine served the first decade of his ministry in a small town church before taking a call to a much larger parish in the suburbs. After he had been in his new call for a few months we chatted on the phone and I asked, "So what is the biggest difference in going from the small town church to the suburbs?" His answer came without hesitation, "The only time I see my members is on Sunday morning. I never run into them in the grocery store, the library, or a restaurant."

The suburbs provide a level of anonymity that simply cannot exist in a small town. A pastor serving in the suburbs can dress in casual clothes and head out to run errands and be pretty certain that no one will accost him with, "Hey, Pastor..." If he is in the mood to invite conversation, he can run those same errands while wearing his clerics and a stranger may well sidle up to him in the

checkout lane to say, “Are you a priest? I have a question....” As a small town pastor, I don’t have a choice. It doesn’t matter what I wear while I’m in Worden, everyone knows that I’m Pastor Curtis, members and townspeople alike.

The scrutiny a pastor and his family experience in parish life is sometimes likened to living in a fishbowl: everyone in the parish sees what is going on in your life. In a small town, this is not unique to the pastor. Growing up in my hometown, everyone knew who I was, who my dad was, who my grandparents were, etc. When you do meet someone new in a small town, the introductions always include this web of relationships. If you are introduced to someone in the suburbs, the second question (after, “What’s your name?”) is usually, “What do you do for a living?” In a small town, that second question is, “And who are your people?” In fact, the question rarely has to be asked. You don’t just say, “Hi, my name’s Heath.” A proper small town introduction is “I’m Heath Curtis, Galen’s boy. My grandma is the babysitter at the Y. My step-sister works at the Buckle...”

Thus the pastor is always visible and always on duty in a small town. Obviously this comes with pros and cons, but I think the pros win out. The only real downside is that it can be stifling to always have to be professional, to never get to “let your hair down.” There are two good ways to compensate for this. First, be sure to maintain good friendships among your brothers in the ministry. This means not only attending Winkel and district pastors’ conferences, but also keeping up with your buddies from seminary and seeking out additional conferences throughout the year. Second, I’ve found that having a hobby that will lead you into the company of folks outside of church is very helpful. For me, that started with competitive target shooting. I’ve since moved on to tennis. But anything would do: a book club, a gardening club, an 8-Ball league, a softball team, etc. To really get out of the community fishbowl, you might have to drive a ways: it’s a 40 minute trip one way for me to play tennis each Thursday. It’s worth it to me: in that group I just get to be another guy who plays tennis. Sure, they know what I do for a living, which sparks a conversation every now and then. But I’m definitely outside of

the professional role I always have to play in Worden and its environs.

The Elders in the Gates

It's good for the small town pastor to get to know his community's leadership: the mayor, the city council or town board, the banker, the fire chief, the cop or sheriff's deputy that patrols town, etc. Maintaining a friendly rapport with such leaders will have benefits for ministry in countless ways, some obvious and some less so. If your church needs a variance from local ordinances in order to expand parking for a parish event, it's clearly a good thing to be on a first name basis with the mayor. If the local constable on patrol knows you, he will be more likely to give you a personal heads up regarding an uptick in local property crime or a stray dog who could be a danger to preschool kids at recess.

Once the pastor establishes himself in this interwoven web of local leadership, less obvious avenues for ministry will open up. The fire chief will give you a call in the middle of the night, even though he is not your parishioner, to ask you to come along and see someone in the hospital who's just experienced a tragedy. The head of the local library board (again: not your member) will let you know to be on the lookout for conflict because two other folks on the board are at loggerheads, and he knows they both go to your church! The local newspaper will ask you to write a column for the Christmas or Easter edition, etc.

Seeking out these official community leaders is a must for the small town pastor. Even more important is finding where "the elders in the gates" meet. Every small town has a coffee shop, bar, or hole in the wall where a bunch of retired guys get together every morning to talk, eat breakfast, drink coffee, and solve the problems of the world. In Worden, this happens at the Yellow Dog Bar and Grill on most weekday mornings. They call themselves "The Table of Knowledge." Next door to me in Bethalto, they meet at the local McDonald's at 5 a.m. on Mondays. My hometown was large enough that there were a

couple of different sets of “gates” for different sets of “elders”: Sehnert’s bakery, Mac’s, the police station, the county clerk’s office. Ask your congregation’s own elders and retired guys where folks get together for coffee in the morning: they will point you in the right direction.

Once you find out where and when this is taking place, I recommend making an appearance just once per week. Do a lot of listening at first. Always order something and tip the waitress well (in cash). I have learned more about my community, people, their past history, and their current culture by listening at The Table of Knowledge than I ever could have by simply living among my parishioners.

I am not joking in using the Biblical term “elders in the gates.” In small town America, these sorts of groups focus public opinion and can even exercise a wholesome veto over local government. Here are just two examples of many I have seen. A young mother in the village was going through a hard time: her husband left her, she herself had been sick, all while trying to raise her two kids. She had no connection to anyone in town: no relatives, no church membership, etc. In the midst of all her troubles, she had neglected to mow her lawn for months. She received written warnings and finally a citation from the village for neglect of property: a \$250 fine. She let her neighbor, a member of The Table of Knowledge, know about all this. The “case” was discussed at the bar the next morning. The verdict: one of the guys at the Table took the ticket up to city hall and read the mayor the riot act: “Don’t you know what this lady is going through? Why didn’t you ask somebody about it? You know I would have mowed her lawn for somebody in a tight spot.” The reply from village officialdom: “The ordinance requires property owners to deal with things themselves.” I will cast a veil of silence over the expletives that followed. In the end, the village was told to tear up the ticket and the Table of Knowledge member mowed the lawn. Case closed.

Another Table of Knowledge veto was exercised when a young and zealous police officer, recently hired by the village, ticketed a Table of Knowledge member for a rolling stop on a deserted

village street. The officer was rude to the driver and didn't offer a warning on this first offense. That's the wrong attitude for law enforcement in small towns: the case was discussed at The Table of Knowledge, and the young officer was soon looking for another locality to serve and protect. (I'm happy to report that he's doing great in his new position: some lessons you have to learn in the streets, not the academy!)

I could go on telling tales of The Table of Knowledge for ages: if I were to write them all, I don't think that all the books in the world could contain them. But these things are written so that you may believe that you need to find this group and listen in!

After a full year of attending The Table of Knowledge once per week on Thursdays, I asked my elders if they thought it would be a good idea to start a men's Bible Class up at the Yellow Dog once per week. They were game on giving it a try. It was very important for me to spend that year building rapport with The Table of Knowledge because I was looking to start my Bible Class on their turf. It was also vital that at least some of the guys at the Table were also my members. I kept the Bible Study very light: a chapter of Scripture (printed out) with just a little commentary from me, then a prayer including prayer requests from those gathered. The total time is about 15 minutes. At first we had just three or four guys from our church who came. Then over the course of a few years, the rest of the Table wanted in. Then guys started to invite their friends. In a few years, it had built up to the point where the whole bar is filled with 25-30 guys from the community, neighboring parishes, and our own congregation. This is in no way a replacement or competitor with The Table of Knowledge. I'm still very much on their turf. They give me 15 minutes of the morning to do my thing, and then it's back to Table of Knowledge business as usual.

The best thing I've ever done for the internal life of our parish is add that Wednesday evening Divine Service. The best thing I've ever done for the external outreach and external service of our parish is this low-key, "elders in the gates" Bible Study. I have no illusions about what a short, 15 minute Bible Study can do in terms of delving deeply into the Word. That's not what this is

about. By showing up each Wednesday morning and reading the Word, praying for our community, and talking with the elders in the gates, I'm building relationships with the wider Christian community, maintaining our congregation as an active and vital part of the community, and making it clear to all what we stand for in our church. I will return to these thoughts in the chapter on evangelism in a small town.

The Small Town Pastor's Family

I was blessed to find my wife in college. We got married in my wife's hometown eight days after graduation from Concordia – Seward. Our not-so-fancy honeymoon consisted of moving in to our first apartment just south of Concordia Seminary and getting to know St. Louis. The first kid arrived in the middle of vicarage. So from the get go, my ministry in a small town has included the pastor's family right alongside the pastor. This certainly limits my ability to give any counsel to the small town pastor who is arriving to his first call before the Lord has seen fit to send him a helpmeet. The best I can do is give this general advice about seeking advice: seek out your brethren who have found a wife while out on their first call. What was their experience? What are the pitfalls? What mistakes did they make that you could avoid? What advice do they have about navigating the contemporary "marriage market"? I can testify to this: now that I am the father to a few college-aged children, I realize that things are far different than they were 25 years ago. You need up to date advice on what trying to meet someone in your late 20s or early 30s is like *today*. God bless your endeavors: "He who finds a wife find a good thing, and obtains the favor of the Lord" (Proverbs 18:22).

Frau Pastor

I struck it rich in more ways than one when I convinced my wife to marry me. We are well-suited to each other in all the important ways, but my wife is especially well-suited to me considering my chosen occupation. While I am the son of blue

collar parents, my wife is a preacher's kid. From day one, she has understood her role as the pastor's wife better than I've understood my own role as the pastor! After all, she grew up watching her mom fulfill this role. Being "Mrs. Pastor" is a famously tricky task. I've been blessed with a wife who has always made it look easy. Here's what I've learned from watching her.

The small town parish expects a two-for-one deal when it comes to the pastor and his wife. And they are not being unfair in this regard, either: they are not asking anything of the pastor and his wife that they would not ask of other community servants and their wives. It's the same thing they expect of the mayor's wife, the fire chief's wife, and the barkeeper's wife: a married couple is a unit, the wife goes above and beyond her daily tasks to support her husband. I've already mentioned how our local fire chief's day job is being a truck driver. His wife also has a full-time job in higher education administration. And she is also the driving force behind the volunteer fire department's two big fundraisers each year. She never complains about those fire calls that come on Thanksgiving Day or a random weekend night at 2 a.m. These things come with the territory.

This is the kind of dedication that is expected of the pastor's wife. It's always been that way in small towns, but their expectations of exactly what the pastor's wife will be called upon to do have changed to accommodate modern realities. Back in the day it was expected that the pastor's wife would play the organ, teach Sunday School, be on the Ladies' Aid committee, attend the LWML rally each fall, and be around during the day to unlock the parish hall, receive deliveries, etc. Today, small town parishioners realize that their pastor's wife may be just like their own daughters and daughters-in-law: a working mom who is not available Monday through Friday during working hours.

As much as I have enjoyed getting to know our fieldworkers and summer vicars over the years, so my wife has enjoyed the friendship of their wives. I asked my wife to set down her thoughts on being Frau Pastor as if she were writing a letter to one of those seminary wives getting ready to take off for that first call to a small town:

If you grew up anywhere but a small Lutheran church in a small town, you're probably going to find a lot of things about such a place weird and inexplicable. It might be helpful to imagine that you're living abroad, trying to figure things out without making a pariah of yourself. Imagine that you care deeply about the people around you for whom this is home; that you are eager to do right by them and fit in with them, even though you're also lonely and disoriented. Then cut out the imagining, and consider these recommendations.

Avoid formal operations. *Don't go to voters' meetings, don't be on the church council. You have a conflict of interests, so the ethical thing to do is recuse yourself. While this is the wisest course of action for a pastor's wife in any size parish, it's especially important in small populations, which don't have much social cushion to buffer personal conflicts.*

Get to know your town. *Read the local paper (subscribe to the local paper!). Go to school basketball games, plays, and concerts. A public school in a small town is a big deal, and it also might not be as bad as you've read on X. But even if it is that bad, it's where you live, and where most people from your church send their kids. The question to ask is how a wise, charitable and righteous person would conduct herself in your situation.*

As long as your neighbors are townies to you, you'll be that transplant who doesn't quite fit to them. The more time you spend among your neighbors in the places where they live their lives (school, pool, bowling alley, bar) the more you will doubt what the internet and your echo chamber of friends has to say about the kind of place where you are, and about human beings in general.

Keep your hobby horse in your own playroom. *Maybe it will drive you crazy that every church event seems engineered to induce Type 2 diabetes, and the secretary plugs Glade air fresheners into every socket. Your family will likely survive this environment, and enjoy the greatest ease of senescence humanity has ever known. If you get asked to bring cookies, do not explain that you will bring something healthy instead. Just bring cookies. Or bring fruit. Or bring healthy cookies, that's the ticket!*

Accept the universe. *You might live 170 miles from Target. Find out how your neighbors do it. They've figured out how to live here and be happy. They will teach you.*

If you have an internet problem, make a plan. *Set a limit, get a lockbox for your phone, and make a list (and a schedule if necessary) of*

other things to do. Being on your phone all the time will make you just as miserable as it made you in high school and college. The best way to keep not fitting into your real life is to continue isolating yourself in the surprisingly small room you've built online.

Make sure that one of the things on your non-phone activities list is going for a walk.

Use your power for good. *Be your congregation's number one keeper of the 8th commandment. Defend your neighbors, speak well of them, and explain everything in the kindest way. Do this in your own mind, do it when you are speaking to others, and do it when you are listening to others speak. Pay attention to people who do this well, and think of how you can adapt their example to fit you.*

One note on gossip: small towns have a bad reputation for this. I think this is largely a cultural misunderstanding. When people in a small town talk about each other, they are often speaking about their own relatives. This is simply not the same as mean-girling. They are thick with each other, and their speech about each other has a different quality than a group of people united by a single commonality. Additionally, health is a common topic of conversation. In a small town, this entails public health (What's she got? When's the last time we shared air?), and/or the need for real, immediate help (If he's taking Grandpa to the city for chemo this week, do the people still at home need a hand with things?).

One note on defending: Keeping the 8th commandment doesn't mean "defending" perverse and unrepentant people with nonsense about how we're all fallen, and all sins are the same in the sight of God. Speaking this way endangers vulnerable people; it is the opposite of defense. This will become clear when a teenager who rides his bike past your house all the time is arrested on child pornography charges.

Rethink your understanding of "gifts." *Your gifts are the neighbors God has given you in this place, and you will serve them best by responding to what they need, rather than airdropping random supplements that may not really fit. Larger churches have more room for people to choose what kind of things they will do. Smaller churches just need someone, anyone, to do the things that keep the place running.*

For example: I do not want to teach Sunday school. I want to go to the adult Bible class and listen to my husband, who is well-read, insightful, hilarious, and a monument to human beauty. Alas, when I consider the facts,

I would be ridiculous to pretend that there is a person in our congregation who would make more sense as our Sunday school teacher than I do. The only reason I have for not doing it is that I don't want to. This is not a good reason.

Did you catch that singular in our Sunday school teacher? That's right, we only have one. With the number of kids we have, we only need one. The kids range in age from 3—no, 2—wait, there's a 15-month-old in here—to 11.

Those kids, and their parents, are gifts God gave me.

Give your congregation the best of yourself as you have opportunity. *It takes a while to get a feel for a place, but the simple fact of your being there has already changed it to be more you-like. People are interested to see what kind of person you are, and what they can expect from you. Give them a chance to give you a chance.*

Pray.

The Preacher's Kids

Among the preacher's kids that I know personally (my kids, my wife and her siblings, and the kids of my circuit brethren) I don't think I know any horror stories about being a "PK." I know a few PKs among my kids' friends from other denominations as well: they also seem to enjoy the life that has been given them. I don't doubt that there are exceptions to this rule, and my heart goes out to them. But all in all, it seems to me that being a small town pastor's kid is a pretty good deal. These kids get a lot of surrogate grandparents to give them presents at Christmastime. They get a leg up the social ladder among the kids at church (and maybe school as well). They are being raised in a loving home. They have a lot of people in their community who know them and are watching out for them.

Undoubtedly there are downsides. A child who, for whatever reason, is having a troubled adolescence will have that trouble magnified because of his or her father's very public calling in the church. The world at large is becoming more and more hostile to the Biblical worldview: Christians are accused of being judgmental, even hateful, and generally out of step with the

modern world. If some Christians can fly under the radar of a hostile world, this is almost impossible for the preacher's kid. The pastor who wants to be a good father must simply recognize these facts and seek all the more to instill a solid Biblical worldview in his kids. This is a difficult task and I can give you a long list of my failings in this regard.

That being said, I still think my kids have received more blessings than hardships due to being the preacher's kids. Folks at church love them and give all sorts of support and opportunities simply because they are my kids. While other kids struggled to find after-school jobs, my kids never had a shortage of opportunities to mow lawns, babysit, feed chickens and goats, shovel snow, house sit, etc. As they got older, these odd jobs turned into "real jobs" in retail, law, and service. Adults always seemed to give the preacher's kids a bit of an advantage in viewing them as a cut above the norm in terms of maturity and responsibility.

Yet for every silver lining, there comes a cloud. The downside of all this congregational love and support is that my kids have had to experience more than their fair share of grief and loss. For every couple in the congregation who took my kids under their wings, showing them love and affection, and becoming a kind of surrogate grandparent to them, there must eventually come the separation of death. It's come to the point where I truly dread the next funeral not for my sake or the sake of the church, but for the sake of my kids. The lady who always brings a cake to each of my children on his/her birthday; the man who met with my younger kids each week on his porch during all the Covid nonsense; the guy who taught my boys how to weed-eat around all the tombstones in the church cemetery: each of these beloved extra-grandparents will someday soon go to their rest and leave a hole in the hearts of my children.

Of course, this is the price of all love in this fallen world. Preacher's kids will experience more of this love, and thus more of this loss. May it attach their hearts all the more to the hope of Christ's resurrection!

The Benefits of Gaining a Reputation as a Hard Worker

As competent, conservative people, small town folks place a high value on hard work. They work hard and they expect their pastor to work hard. In every conflict between pastor and congregation that I've ever heard of, the charge of "laziness" against the pastor is always tossed in as well, no matter what the core issue might be. This is an easy charge to make against a pastor since so much of our work takes place behind the desk, beside the hospital bed, and in preparation for public worship. People see only a fraction of what the pastor is doing all week.

Just as every conflict between pastor and people comes with the charge of "laziness," every healthy relationship between pastor and congregation that I've seen is accompanied by a pastor's reputation for being a hard worker. The wise small town parish pastor will strive to make a first impression as a hard working man. When I started out, I was blessed to receive this good advice from a more experienced pastor. He gave me something very specific to do to help me earn this reputation: keep a "billable hours diary."

If you have ever been unfortunate enough to need an attorney's assistance, then you know about "billable hours." Attorneys charge their clients based on how much time they spend on their cases. In order to ensure that this is done fairly, the state Bar Association requires attorneys to account for their time in a diary that tracks what they do on either the tenth of an hour (every 6 minutes) or quarter of an hour (15 minutes). So a bill from a lawyer might look like this:

Responding to Jones' email. 10/25/25 .25hrs

Meeting with Jones. 11/03/25 1.75hrs

Drafting Jones contract. 11/04/25 .75hrs

My mentor in the ministry encouraged me to keep this sort of "billable hours" diary for the first year of my call and make it part of the elders' agenda each month. It worked wonders: both for me and for them. They got a better understanding of what a

pastor did, and it certainly helped me to develop good habits. When you have to write down what you are doing every 15 minutes, it really makes you watch out for falling down rabbit holes on the internet and other time wasters!

In addition to this billable hours diary, I encourage young, small town pastors to be as visible as possible to their parishioners during the week. I call this “the rule of 4 in 6.” During the six days of the week that are not Sunday, try to make sure that parishioners are actually seeing you work on four other days during the week. That might be a shut in seeing you for a visit on Monday; a Ladies’ Aid meeting on Tuesday; Catechism class on Wednesday; and a Bible class on Thursday. It might also be chatting with your secretary on Tuesday afternoon and letting her know that you will be heading out on a hospital call. You get the idea: let your people see you at work.

How many hours does all this take? How much time should a small town pastor be putting in to earn a reputation as a “hard worker”? Consider what you are asking of your people. You want them to go out into the world and work a 40-hour week, and then come to church on Sunday, and ideally come to a Bible class, too. And you want a certain number of them to also volunteer as officers, choir members, and Sunday School teachers above and beyond this. Therefore it’s hard for a pastor to be seen as a hard worker if he is not putting in 40 hours during the week besides what he is doing on Sunday.

That is a lot of work. But it’s meaningful, blessed, and generally enjoyable work. It’s also what you are asking of your people: how could you do less? We also have a big advantage over our parishioners that comes with our calling: flexibility of scheduling. The small town pastor has a lot of freedom in arranging his time. If you know you are looking at an evening of church services and meetings, you have the freedom to take it easy in the afternoon (unless an emergency comes up). You can balance your extra busy Lent and Advent by taking a chunk of days off after Easter and Christmas. Another advantage of keeping the billable hours diary is that it will help you and your elders see inefficiencies in the parish schedule. A schedule that spreads meetings all through the

week is hard on the pastor's family, and probably just as hard on the other volunteers as well. If they can see all this in black and white, your elders will probably work with you to condense the meeting schedule down to one or two nights a week.

Earning this reputation as a hard worker early in your pastorate will set you up for all kinds of benefits down the road. Your elders will have no problem blessing your desire for extra vacation days scattered throughout the year if they know you are working hard. In a small town parish it's difficult to get more than two or three *Sundays* off a year, but for a pastor with a reputation as a hard worker, weekday vacation days are very easy to come by. Once you establish the fact that you are a man dedicated to his calling and internally motivated to get the work done, your elders will happily bless you and your family with the freedom to take little weekday trips throughout the year.

What About Really Small Churches?

If you are at a truly small parish, you may well struggle to fill those 40 hours a week outside Sunday morning. One of the congregations I serve in my dual parish regularly has around 15 folks in the pews on Sunday. Serving this congregation just isn't a full-time job. That's why they sought out a partnership ministry more than two decades ago. More and more of our parishes, and Christian churches in general, are becoming congregations that are simply too small to provide full-time employment for a pastor.

This is a society-wide phenomenon within American Christianity and it's a real struggle for small town churches to face. Even the *Atlantic* has noticed it, publishing an article (way back in 2014) titled "Higher Calling, Lower Wages: The Vanishing of the Middle-Class Clergy." What should our response to this problem be?

In attempting to answer that question, I want to be sure to distinguish between the response of *church officials* and the response of *pastors serving small congregations*. For over a decade I have served the Synod's Office of National Mission, traveling across the country helping pastors and lay leaders tackle the issue

of faithful congregational stewardship. In that role, I think it is paramount that I help encourage congregations to uphold the Biblical model for compensating our pastors: “In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (I Corinthians 9:14). That’s what the Lord set up: congregations making sacrificial offerings that will allow a man to dedicate his working life to the ministry. Woe betide (in my opinion) the Synod or district official who holds up any other plan as a competing ideal to strive for. Synod and district officials need to be exhorting, teaching, and equipping congregations to faithful stewardship for the sake of the Lord’s ministry. They should be assisting smaller congregations in evaluating their situation and finding a way for every congregation to be served by a man who is fairly compensated in such a way that he can support his family while dedicating his working life to the ministry. Many districts are doing good work on this score resulting in thriving ministries via many different models: circuit rider, hub-and-spoke, cathedral-and-parishes, etc.

But this will be cold comfort to the parish pastor who finds himself in a situation where that just isn’t happening, even after good efforts have been made. His small town’s population has been declining for decades. There don’t seem to be any good options for partnership with other congregations. The best and brightest of the high school graduates head off to college and will never be back. The average age of the church and the town has gone up and up. Various businesses have closed. Of course this has led the congregation to dwindle as well. The congregants themselves are good Christian people. They are faithful and generous. But with only 20 or 30 people in the pews each Sunday, they simply cannot provide a full-time living wage. What is the faithful pastor supposed to do in this situation?

The first thing he should do is take a deep breath: if you are facing this situation it’s not because you are a bad pastor. You are caught up in trends that are much larger than you or your congregation. There is no magic wand to wave to “fix” a shrinking town. There is no other man with a “soul-winning personality” who could step into your shoes and suddenly turn

your parish into an evangelism powerhouse. You've been faithful; you've worked hard; you've loved your people; you've preached God's Word and administered His Sacraments. Of course you've made mistakes along the way as well: but you almost certainly linger over those too much. The only kind of pastors we call are sinners in need of forgiveness and mercy. The simple truth is that you've ended up in a situation that is beyond your control. This has become more common in America across the board, and it is likely to continue to do so in the coming decades.

Men who find themselves in this situation almost invariably explore the possibility of taking a call to a larger congregation before they look into options for earning an income alongside the ministry. They go through the proper procedures of contacting their district president to ask to have their names circulated on call lists. They review their information on the PIF and SET forms. They answer inquiries from call committees and they interview via Zoom. Yet a man may find (as a good number have) that after months or years, a suitable does call not seem to be forthcoming. This may be due to geographic restrictions caused by health or family obligations, or it may be that the calls that have come his way all look like going from "the frying pan into the fire" in any number ways (brewing conflict, ability to provide financially for the ministry, etc.).

If you find yourself in such a situation you must remember that your calling from God as a pastor exists alongside your calling from God as husband and father. These vocations are meant to exist in harmony with one another: but harmony only happens in the presence of tension. If your congregation simply can't pay a living wage, and there does not seem to be any way to expand your work in the ministry via partnership with other congregations, and it looks like another call is not going to come any time soon, then your vocation as husband and father is going to require you to find additional work alongside the ministry. You should not feel guilty about that at all. While I believe strongly that district and Synod officials need to be working hard to make sure that all our pastors can receive a fair, living wage through work in the ministry, as far as *you* are concerned, *your* vocation as

husband and father is going to call on *you* to find additional income until that ideal can be realized.

I have many friends and colleagues in the ministry who have found themselves in this situation. Several have been able to take on roles in teaching (either in Lutheran or public schools). It seems that public schools in small towns are especially always looking for good substitute teachers and a pastor's academic degrees and life experience are often enough to qualify for this role even without a teaching certificate. Others have taken positions in the white collar world: I know men who are thriving in small church ministry alongside part-time careers in banking, insurance, engineering, and real estate. I also know men who have gotten into (or *back* into) farming, the skilled trades, factory work, or retail.

Often a pastor is reluctant to bring this topic up to his elders: how is he going to tell them that he has to look for work alongside the ministry? More than once, I have seen a colleague gain respect in the eyes of his parishioners once he has had this frank conversation with the elders. After all, they can see the reality on the ground. More likely than not, they feel guilty about not being able to provide for their pastor like their church used to be able to do a couple decades back. Yet once the topic is broached, you may be surprised at how well things come together (again: enlisting a circuit visitor or district staff may be of help for this discussion). There's no doubt that it's tough to balance a pastor's calling with the need for outside income in these situations: but all things necessary for your vocations are possible under God's grace. Do what needs to be done for the good of your family without guilt and with confidence in God's grace. At the same time, as a church body we need to be holding district and Synod leaders accountable to the Biblical model of ministry: a full-time living wage for every man who serves in the ministry.

Predictably Unpredictable

In this chapter I have tried to lay out some helpful advice on topics that I see affecting all of my small town brothers in the

ministry today. There's plenty else I could say about my ministry here in Worden and Carpenter: all the little ins and outs that make these places what they are. Your congregation will also have its own micro-culture, expectations, history, conflicts, etc. All I can say with certainty about these things is that they will be predictably unpredictable! You will be caught off guard and surprises will never cease. You will find yourself out of your depth and you'll be driven to your knees in prayer. God will make sure to keep you humble and dependent on His grace. But in all of it there is another thing that is totally predictable: joy. Being a small town Lutheran pastor is just a great job – and more than a job: it is a true calling from God full of purpose and joy.

4 EVANGELISM & DISCIPLESHIP

A couple years ago I sat through a meeting at the LCMS International Center as part of my work for the Office of National Mission. The meeting was all about the Synod's website and social media presence. The presenters ran through various data points: which platform had the most usage, how many daily hits on this or that, how effective was text vs. video, etc. I'd have to go back and look at my notes to retrieve a lot of that information, but one fact stuck firmly in my mind because it was so illuminating for understanding the challenges our churches face. When pastors and lay leaders come to look for information at the Synod's website, what are they looking for? Far and away the most searched for words are: *evangelism* and *stewardship*. Each of these deserves a chapter putting them in the context of the small town church.

Outreach & Inreach

Our Lord Jesus gave the Church her marching orders at the end of Matthew's Gospel: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to keep all that I have commanded you." Making disciples of Jesus is simply what the Church does. Everything that happens in the Church is oriented toward this goal. When the Church's efforts of baptizing and teaching are aimed at our current members and their children, we call this "inreach" or "discipleship." When the Church turns to those outside her fellowship, offering Christ's teachings and His

call to baptism, we call it “outreach” or “evangelism.” The content of the discipling is always the same: baptizing them and teaching. The only difference between outreach and inreach is the target audience. Congregations with lively, active discipleship for their members will naturally overflow into evangelism for their neighbors: inreach and outreach, discipleship and evangelism, go hand in hand.

Therefore, pastors and lay leaders who would like to see their congregations be more active in evangelism would do well to first make sure that their congregation is doing a good job with the discipleship of their current members. What does this look like in the small town parish? Mainly it looks like preaching the whole counsel of God to the congregation throughout the year in the worship service and encouraging and equipping the people to study the Word and be faithful in prayer daily.

A focal point of discipleship in a Lutheran congregation is the confirmation process. I’ve learned a lot about what works and what doesn’t when it comes to discipleship from my attempts (and plenty of failings) to make the confirmation process in our congregation more focused on lifelong discipleship. The Lutheran Reformation insisted on keeping its list of Sacraments short. While the Apology to the Augsburg Confession holds out the possibility of considering any rite that has any promise of God attached (like prayer, marriage, or ordination) to be a Sacrament, the Lutheran Church focuses in on the specific promise of the forgiveness of sins. Only those rites which are instituted by God for the forgiveness of sins are Sacraments. Confirmation doesn’t fit on either the shorter or the longer list. The Rite of Confirmation does not give the forgiveness of sins. Nor does this rite, *per se*, bear any promise from God. So Confirmation cannot be of the *esse* of Church; yet it is certainly of the *bene esse*. While the rite itself is not commanded by God and bears no promise, at least two actions within the rite do bear the promise of God. We pray for the confirmand to be blessed and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, and God has promised to hear our prayers. And as the preamble to the rite notes, Jesus has promised to confess

before His Father all who confess Him before men. Confirmation provides the opportunity for a Christian to do just this.

Confirmation also taps into something that is profoundly human: the desire to mark rites of passage. Confirmation has always served in the Lutheran Church as just this sort of liminal event, an initiation. Confirmation marks a line: once you cross it as a young confirmand, you have passed over into at least some portion of adulthood. If you are confirmed as an adult, confirmation marks the line of Lutheranism: cross this line and you are leaving behind your upbringing as a Baptist, or a Roman Catholic, or a Presbyterian.

This Rite of Confirmation thus makes up a large part of Lutheran culture and looms large over the pastoral task of discipleship. It should be noted that this rite is not coterminous with the Church's mandate to make disciples (Matthew 28:16-20). Many of the complaints we have had about confirmation over the years (centuries!) have been about the confusion of confirmation and catechesis. If the Church's job of catechesis, the job of "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you," can be reduced to the process that leads to the Rite of Confirmation, then the Church will fail in her duty. There is no graduation from catechesis. There is no end to discipleship. The Church must always be teaching and individual Christians must always be taught.

That being said, the process that leads to confirmation will play a large role in the overall catechetical program of your church. The pastor should leverage this fact in his preaching. Every pastor has complained about parents not fulfilling their role in catechizing their children at home, but how often have we been the problem by failing to connect our preaching to the catechetical journey of our confirmands?

After noticing my failings in this regard, I have made two attempts to better connect our chief discipleship text (the *Small Catechism*) to my preaching. At first I simply put the confirmands' weekly memory work into the Sunday bulletin. That at least placed the Catechism before all the disciples of the congregation. After some years of that practice, I now go further and have a

booklet printed up each year for every family of the church to use in daily devotions which includes the week's memory work from Catechism and Bible. Directly before I begin the sermon each week I have the confirmands "repeat after me" with the new week's work from this *Family Devotion Book*. The Concordia Catechetical Academy has long produced a wonderful resource with the same idea in mind: *The Congregation at Prayer*. I am now eagerly awaiting the availability of a resource which I have field tested that I think will serve very well in a similar capacity: *Speaking with One Voice* by Rev. Dr. Greg Truwe.

The general point I want to make here is that the people need specific guidance for their ongoing discipleship. They need to be encouraged and equipped to read the Bible and pray every day. Parents need to actually be taught how to lead family devotions with their children. Young and old need to be reminded in the sermon to grasp all the promises that God has made for those who read this Word and call upon Him in prayer! This is the heart of ongoing discipleship.

Barriers to Small Town Outreach

Disciples of Jesus want to share His grace and tell the Good News. So the first step to effective outreach is discipleship among the church members. A church full of faithful disciples of Jesus who are strengthened by the faithful preaching of His Word and the grace-giving Sacraments are reading to invite others to share in the joy of the Kingdom. Yet experience has shown that even faithful members of faithful churches will encounter barriers to effective outreach. These barriers will also merit pastoral attention.

What kind of church do people like to go to? All around America people go to many different varieties of churches: Presbyterian, Catholic, Lutheran, and Methodist; churches with praise bands and churches with organs; congregations led by young, dynamic preachers and congregations still being served by the same silver-haired preacher for 30 years. So is there a single answer to the question "what kind of church do people like to go

to?” I think there is, and we will find it if we look at the Church from the perspective of a sociologist: what kind of organizations do people like to join in general? Several years ago I was actively involved in competitive pistol shooting. It’s an enjoyable sport, but the competitions are a lot like swim meets or wrestling matches: a lot of waiting around for your turn, sometimes a half hour, an hour, or more of waiting for a 60-second burst of activity. So there is a lot of chitchat among the competitors between rounds. A gun club about an hour from my house began hosting monthly meets and I started attending them. During all that down time, waiting for my turn to shoot, I would overhear a couple of members of the gun club talk about their organization. The conversations always went something like this:

“Hey, wasn’t Tom supposed to mow the lane for the rifle range this week? It looks terrible.”

“John said he was going to fix the screen door on the clubhouse. It’s still not done.”

“Can you believe Jim didn’t get the lead removal guys out this week?”

Month after month I would hear these guys talk like this all during the matches. About six months in to my shooting there, these two fellows approached me about joining the club. They stressed all the benefits I could garner by joining: “Hey Preacher, you should join the gun club! You get a discount on each monthly shoot; you can use the club house for church events; we have a picnic for kids on the last Saturday of the month. And it’s affordable!”

My reply: “Guys, why would I join this gun club when all you do every time I’m here is moan and complain about the place?”

What kind of church do people like to go to? *Churches where other people are already happy to be!* There’s very little theology in that statement: like I said, I’m looking at the problem from the viewpoint of a sociologist. Very little theology, but a lot of worldly wisdom. If you want your church to be an inviting place that reaches out and calls others in, then never say an unkind word about your pastor, your church, or your fellow members. If you see a problem, step up to be part of the solution instead of

spreading discontent with your words. Be happy to be a part of your church and talk about why you like it. What motivates you to set the alarm every Sunday and get out of bed? Focus on those things.

I've said there is very little theology in this, but there is some. The Scriptures are full of encouragements for us to build one another up, speak kindly, and exude an attitude of humble service. I've said that the foundation to effective outreach is in-reach: discipleship for the congregational members leads to people who will want to spread the Good News. Well, what does Jesus say about His disciples? "They will know you are My disciples by how you love one another."

Everyone already has a church. An inviting church is a place where the disciples of Jesus love one another, where they enjoy the fellowship they have in the Lord, where they are formed by the Word, and where they want so share the Lord's grace. Words of complaint and an attitude of criticism run counter to all these things. That's true of any church, no matter where it might be located. There are other barriers to effective outreach that are more characteristic of the small town church. One of those is the notion that "everyone in our town already has a church." The town where I live has five churches: Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Disciples of Christ, and Assemblies of God. That's a lot of churches for 1100 people! Decades ago, I'm sure that a majority of Worden's residents did in fact belong to one of these churches. But times have definitely changed. The decline of America's Christian observance is a well-known fact. So while many of my older members may feel that it is almost rude to invite your neighbor to church since they probably already have their own, the math doesn't lie: our church is the largest in town, so by simple math I know that only about 250-300 people in Worden actually go to church each week. Sit down and do the math for your small town and I bet you will find the same sort of ratios.

What if I mess it up? Pious laypeople are sometimes afraid to spread the Good News about Jesus out of fear that they will only make things worse. I think this notion comes from absorbing the outlook of American Evangelicalism which is an Arminian

version of Christianity, where your salvation is dependent upon making a decision for Christ with your own free will. In such a scenario, evangelism is high reward and high risk! If I do my job right, I could get this person to believe in Jesus! That would be amazing! But what if I do it wrong? What if I confuse them or anger them and don't have the right answers? Then it will be my fault that they didn't make their decision for Jesus! It will be my fault that they don't make it to heaven! The answer to this barrier is to reassert a Biblical view of salvation. My favorite Bible verse for explaining this to lay people is Acts 13:48, "And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed." Salvation really is by grace alone: not only your salvation, but also your neighbor's. Paul boldly proclaimed the Word and knew that the Lord had His people who would respond to it: "those appointed to eternal life believed." The same sentiment is on display again a few chapters later: "One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14). Paul didn't have to worry that he was not eloquent enough or smart enough because it is the Lord who "opens the heart to pay attention" to the Word. Lutherans, who understand this Biblical truth, can proclaim the Word and invite folks to church without fear. You can't mess it up because it is the Lord's doing! For you it is all upside: the Lord has invited you to be the conduit of His Word through which He does His work.

What do you actually do? So what does outreach actually look like in a small town congregation? What should we actually be doing? As I said about discipleship in general, people need a concrete description for what the Christian life looks like. How does a disciple of Jesus actually live? In the same way, our congregation members need some concrete advice on how to reach out in today's world. Here are three things we have done that I think have really helped.

Community Visibility. At the congregational level, we have striven to make ourselves visible in our community. We participate in the life of our town. I've already talked about the Men's Bible Class I hold each week at the local bar. My wife and I also go up to the same bar to watch *Jeopardy!* each Wednesday. We have a float in the Wordigras parade each year. The youth group and their younger siblings all walk in the Halloween costume contest run by the American Legion. We host a chili cook off in the winter and one of our community's biggest events of the year is our congregation's Sausage Supper in the fall. None of these things is evangelism *per se*. But this visibility makes evangelism easier. We are a known quantity in our community. So when our members invite people to church, it makes it easier for folks to accept the invitation. You might call all this preparing the soil for the seed of the Word to be cast. This kind of community involvement and visibility is especially important in the culture of small town America.

Congregational Efforts. Turning to congregational efforts that are more directly focused on inviting our neighbors, we have found two tools to be helpful. First, we purchase new home owner information from a company that compiles the public real estate data. This costs about \$70 a month and it is money well spent. Address labels come to us each month for the folks who have moved into town. This allows us to send letters inviting people to come to our church or even stop by with a "welcome wagon" basket.

A couple summers ago, we expanded this program to do a canvass of the entire town. We followed a method that has become popular with church planters: a door-to-door community survey. The survey had four simple questions: 1. What do you like about our community? 2. What is a need you see in our community? 3. What do you think of when you hear "Trinity Lutheran Church?" 4. Do you have anything you'd like us to pray for? Our church members walked through the community on two successive Saturdays knocking on doors and recording answers to the questions. If someone wasn't home, we left a copy of the survey which included a QR code for them to complete it online.

I would love to tell you that if you take up these two efforts (contacting new home owners and the community survey), it will make your congregation an evangelism powerhouse and lead to dozens of new church members: but that didn't happen for us. Yet the efforts are still very worthwhile. Our members were especially energized by the community survey, and it also gave us a better idea of what our neighbors thought about our town and our church. It let us know that our efforts in being visible to our community have been effective: time and time again, folks could tell us something they knew about our church ("you guys have the Sausage Supper, right" or "You guys do the thing up at the Yellow Dog on Wednesday mornings, right" or "Our kids play on your playground.") These efforts also have an affect on our members: they proclaim that we are an inviting church. Talking about outreach and actually doing something active on the congregational level encourages outreach where it is most effective: the personal level.

Personal Invitation. The statistics on new church members couldn't be more conclusive: when people join a church, 85% of the time it is because a member of that church personally invited them to come along. Being an inviting church means cultivating disciples of Jesus who invite people to come share the Lord's grace with them. So we have focused on giving our people a simple tool to make this easier: we print up business cards that say "Come and See!" along with our address, website, and worship times. At Christmas time we have a special set of cards for our members to use to invite folks to our children's program on Christmas Eve. Once again, the point of these cards is not that they contain some evangelism magic (just do this and folks will rush in!), rather the point is that it encourages, normalizes, and eases the process of inviting someone to church with you.

Evangelism "chain migration." A few years ago, my wife quipped that most of our evangelism at Trinity comes by "chain migration." She said this after we had four adult confirmations on one Sunday that were all from the same family. It was a pattern we have seen time and time again and it went like this. Several years ago a young man in our congregation got married to

wonderful young lady who had grown up in various Pentecostal and Baptist churches. She was a faithful Christian, but not really that interested in Lutheranism. Our member kept to his faith and quietly witnessed to the importance of it by his actions. She would attend with him regularly and he would also attend her church. After several years she began to see a real difference between the two churches and wanted to explore more of what we taught. She and I went through the Catechism and had many good discussions. It's a joy to teach our Biblical faith to Christians who grew up in other confessions: once we open the Scriptures to them, it's been my experience that they jump at the purity of the teaching in our church. She rejoiced in the objective grace offered in the Sacraments. She was moved by the reverence of our services. In fact, it was a lack of reverence in her Pentecostal church that pushed her toward exploring her husband's faith (something about a youth led service with beach balls in the sanctuary!). But she wasn't a push over: she asked hard questions, especially about infant baptism, and really wanted to delve into the Scriptures. At last, when all her questions were answered from the Scriptures, she was ready to be confirmed.

Like many who find the pure teaching of our church later in life, she became an outspoken champion of our church and started inviting her family to come and visit. So several months after she had joined the church, I had her parents and her brother and sister-in-law in confirmation class as well. All of them are now beloved, active members of our congregation. All of this began with the simple, firm faith of my member who was raised by his parents and catechized by my predecessors to cling to the Word of God. By steady, patient continuance in faith and love, his wife was moved to explore our confession. Then by the power of God's Word she was convinced. Then by the prompting of the Spirit, she invited others to "Come and See!"

Now is Our Time! American Christianity is going through a difficult time. The culture is against us. Every denominational family is decreasing in membership. For the first time in 400 years of history, fewer than half of Americans belong to a Christian

church. In 2018, CNN reported that 23% of Americans were Evangelical Protestants (Bible-believing Protestant churches like the LCMS, Southern Baptists, etc.), 23% were Roman Catholic, and 23% were “No Religion.” That last category of the “nones” has only grown since then. CNN also noted that no matter how you sliced the American population demographically (by sex, geography, education, political leanings, age, etc.), in every category Christianity was down while “no religion” was up.

Lutherans are uniquely equipped to face this challenge. While we are often humble to a fault or even the very caricature of the self-deprecating Midwesterner, the truth is that we LCMS Lutherans are already an evangelism powerhouse! According to data used by Dr. George Hawley in his book *Demography, Culture, and the Decline of America’s Christian Denominations*, fully 35% of Lutheran adults did not grow up in the Lutheran Church. That’s an amazing number! In fact, it’s about the same percentage of adult converts as is found among Mormons.

Some people don’t find this number impressive because most of those converts to Lutheranism grew up in other *Christian* churches. So, they say, that’s not *real evangelism*. I couldn’t disagree more. The Gospel is also for lapsed, misled, confused, and unchurched Christians. In our day and age, that is exactly what we have a lot of, and it is the group of people that we as Confessional Lutherans are especially good at reaching out to! If you think about it, this is in our DNA as Lutherans. The Lutheran Church started out as a movement within Christianity to clarify and explain the truth of God’s Word to Christians who had slipped into notions of works-righteousness or despair under the pope. From the very beginning we have been very good at explaining the faith to Christians who were lapsed or in despair. Today that is exactly what we have a lot of in America! So today is the hour for the Lutheran Church to step forth and boldly proclaim the truths of God’s Word to a nation that is ready to hear it!

5 STEWARDSHIP & FINANCES

For more than a decade now I have served our Synod's Office of National Mission as the director of Stewardship Ministry. In this role I've been helping pastors, congregations, and districts teach our people what the Bible says about one aspect of the Christian's vocation in the Church: financial stewardship. When I head out into the districts to conduct a circuit workshop, I usually meet with the Winkel pastors first and then later in the evening, the laity of the circuit join us. During my presentation to the pastors there comes a point where I ask them to play word association: I'll call out a word and ask them to call out the first thing that comes to mind. The word, of course, is "stewardship." The answers I get in reply from the clergy are typically things like: *money, fear, ugh, legalistic, bokey, at a loss*, etc. Sometimes an especially pious man will say *generosity* or *opportunity*. After asking about why fear and "ugh" are on the list, someone finally comes up with the root of all the trouble: that for the parish pastor, talking about stewardship feels *self-serving*. Everyone knows where my paycheck comes from. How can I preach about financial stewardship when it will just sound like I want more money?

This is especially felt to be true in the small town parish where everyone knows everything about everyone else!

In the evening session with the laity I play the same game. The laity's list is remarkably similar to that of the pastors': *money, fear, uncomfortable, guilty*, etc. Once again, a more pious individual will say "*time, talent, and treasure*" or *opportunity to serve*. I find it very endearing that the laity never come up with the pastors' chief fear: they never say that stewardship is self-serving for the clergy.

When I arrived in 2005 at the parishes I am still serving, I felt exactly the same way about stewardship as all those other pastors feel. My people felt the same about stewardship as all the people I go out and meet with around the Synod feel today. It's a tough topic. We don't quite know where it fits in our theology. It feels foreign and we worry that it might not be Biblical at all. How can we teach this without turning into American Evangelical prosperity preachers or self-righteous Pharisees?

If you want the whole story about how my parish and I got through the financial struggle we faced by delving into the Word, you can check out *Stewardship Under the Cross*.¹ If you want even more information about how to approach this topic in your church, you can grab the Lexham Ministry Series book I co-authored, *Stewardship for the Care of Souls*.² It's a topic that can't be ignored for two reasons. First of all, it's part of what the Bible teaches. We simply have to teach the whole Word of God. Second, in our day and age there is no getting around the necessity of financial faithfulness for our congregations. There are so many headwinds blowing against Christianity today that we can't afford to try to slide by with shoddy teaching about what the Bible says about supporting the work of the church financially. We can't live in the red; we can't be anything less than faithful and forthright in our church finances.

The difficulty of dealing with stewardship forced me to think about preaching over a longer period of time. Here was a Biblical topic, clearly dealt with in the *Small Catechism's* Table of Duties, that I needed to deal with. Yet it was a difficult topic. It had been neglected in my parish for a long time. Thus it could not be dealt with by just covering it lightly in one sermon, nor even by dedicating an entire sermon to it. Repetition is the mother of learning and here was a topic my people needed to learn. How could I take the time I needed to teach this Biblical topic without

1 A free .pdf of this book is available at lcms.org/stewardship. A paperback edition can be purchased at lulu.com.

2 Co-authored with Nathan Meador. The book is available on Amazon or directly through Lexham Press.

forcing it into a sermon where it really didn't belong or following the American Evangelicals into the practice of a "sermon series" chosen by the pastor?

The tool was there all the time. The wisdom of the Church has foreseen this need. The lectionary provides ample opportunity to cover all the chief teachings of Scripture. If it wasn't getting done, the problem was me. This was brought home to me when I faced the need to cover the difficult topic of stewardship. When I actually read through the lectionary with the thought of teaching stewardship in mind, I found that there were about a dozen weeks in the Church Year that provided texts appropriate to teaching this doctrine. Through my work with the Synod I commissioned another parish pastor to look through the 3-Year Lectionary and he discovered the same thing: Series A, B, and C each provide about a dozen opportunities to cover this topic.³

This was the first time I actually thought about intentionally preaching a doctrine over the course of a year. I had heard of pastors who took time each summer, or over Christmas break, to plan a year's preaching, but I had always associated this with pastors who were following the American Evangelical practice of creating "sermon series" out of whole cloth. I had never thought of using the Church's lectionary to actually plan ahead of time until dealing with stewardship forced me to do so.

All of our congregations, and most especially our small town churches, need to set aside the fear they might have about approaching the Biblical topic of financial stewardship. We love the Word of God and we know that everything that God says to us in the Scriptures, He says to bless us. Especially if your church is feeling financial pressure to the point where you are considering curtailing ministry, cutting staff, or seeking a partnership ministry: it's vital that you find out what your financial capacity really is by putting the Word of God first! All of this is laid out in detail in *Stewardship Under the Cross* (www.lcms.org/stewardship) and I hope that your church leadership will read through this book soon!

3 The resource "Stewardship in the Lectionaries" is available in the *A-Z Stewardship Guide* at lcms.org/stewardship.

Transparency and Faithfulness. As a final encouragement, let me say a word about financial transparency. When my congregation was living in the red, the temptation was always there for the church council to keep quiet and not upset anyone about the dire state of the church's finances. But we are called to be children of light who perform their good works in the daylight! The truth will always eventually come out anyway. When the truth finally became undeniable in our congregation, it turned out that we were 42% upside down in our budget! It took the bank canceling our line of credit for us to face up to the truth and get serious about putting the Word of God first in our finances and being completely transparent with our members about our financial situation. Once the board of elders and I did this, things fell into place. And it's no wonder: God blesses His Word wherever it is preached! So don't wait another day to sort out your congregation's finances! Check out all the resources we've put together at lcms.org/stewardship and get started applying God's Word to your difficulties today!

6 WORSHIP MATTERS

The Lord's Day and Modern American Life

I'm convinced that the most important thing I ever did for the people of my congregation is to begin holding Divine Service at 6:30 p.m. on Wednesdays. It's a spoken Divine Service with a shorter homily instead of a full-length sermon, so the entire service takes less than 30 minutes. I felt strongly about adding this service due to both my own background and what I was seeing in the lives of my people. When I was growing up, my dad worked as a meat cutter and there is no getting around working a lot of weekends in the retail grocery business. If Sunday had been the only day of the week on which there were worship services, then it just would have been impossible for him to attend church very often. No amount of encouragement from any pastor can change the fact that you've got to earn a paycheck.

When I got to Worden, I saw the same dynamic in the lives of my parishioners. Some worked factory jobs with rotating schedules (4 on, 4 off; switching between first, second, and third shifts), some were in retail like my dad, some were over the road truck drivers, some were nurses, some were farmers. In all of these occupations it is simply not possible to tell your boss, "I don't work Sunday mornings." And yes, some of my people wanted to go to the lake for the weekend, and others wanted their kids to have the opportunity to play on competitive travel teams for baseball, volleyball, and soccer. It is easier to criticize those choices: Christians should prioritize being in the Lord's House on the Lord's Day. Yet there comes a point where the leaders of the

church need to admit that “it is hard for thee to kick against the goads.” For the near term I just don’t see our society turning back the clock to a time when business, sports, and travel shut down for Sunday. We can complain about it, or we can do something to help get our people God’s Word and Sacraments.

So I think it is vital to offer a weeknight service each and every week. In the northwoods states (especially Wisconsin) there has long been a tradition of holding Thursday night church during the summer months. My home congregation held a Monday evening service. I’ve found Wednesday to work best because it is equidistant from the weekend: you can either make up the Sunday you missed (due to illness, work schedule, or travel) or you can attend the Wednesday ahead of a planned weekend trip.

A fair number of congregations have Saturday evening services. These are generally disliked by the pastors, for both personal and pastoral reasons. On the personal level, a Saturday evening service is tough on the pastor’s family. His kids have to go to school Monday through Friday just like everyone else’s. Sunday is a big work day for dad, and usually mom and the kids as well (as Sunday School teachers, choir members, acolytes, etc.). Add a Saturday service into the mix and there is no single day in the week when the pastor, his wife, and his kids all have the day off together! This really is a personal hardship that should be enough for congregations to move away from Saturday services.

But there is an even bigger pastoral reason to move the Saturday service to a weeknight: a Saturday service does not help people who work or travel on weekends. Who exactly is a Saturday night service serving? Mainly it is folks who for either health reasons or personal preference don’t want to get up early on Sunday morning. This is a real need, especially for certain elderly members who have a hard time with mornings. But that need can be met by an evening service on any day of the week. Folks who are missing church on Sunday due to work or travel are not going to be able to make use of a Saturday service either.

There is no doubt that moving the Saturday service to a different night has the potential for controversy and even conflict. In your congregation it might just be a third-rail that the pastor

and elders can't touch right now. In such a case, I would still recommend starting a weeknight service in addition to the Saturday service. Over the course of a few years, you may be surprised how that weeknight service eclipses the Saturday service in attendance in terms of overall numbers and the diversity of the congregation who can come to the weeknight service. In such a case, the Saturday service will wither on its own and be naturally subsumed by the weeknight service.

When I first started the Wednesday service, there were plenty of weeks where the only attenders were my wife and kids. Today, our Wednesday service is regularly 20-25% of the size of our Sunday service. So while it did take a while for the culture of the congregation to change, eventually it greatly improved our weekly attendance. After patient teaching about the importance of weekly worship, our parishioners have now internalized the need for them to be there at least once a week: in other words, they formed the new habit of attending on Wednesday if they have to miss a Sunday.

This weeknight service also provides another “anchor” to the parish’s week. You can schedule meetings, youth group, choir, a Bible class, etc., to take place right after the service. This is another area where a weeknight service beats a Saturday service hands down. My “office hours” for confession or consultation are scheduled for the hour and a half before this service. On the weeks when no one comes (which is most weeks) I have that time to read and pray.

That is the greatest benefit of the Wednesday service for me as the pastor: it helps keep my nose to the grindstone. If it is a quiet week around a small parish it is all too easy for a pastor to get the necessities of the week’s work done on Monday and Tuesday and then just sort of drift through the rest of the week. Having the Wednesday service to prepare for and conduct, along with the other activities that we have added before and after that service, has been a real blessing to me and my focus on the mission of the church. No matter how big or how small your church is, I think you would also benefit from a weeknight service.

The Worship Wars Are (Mostly) Over (At Least in Small Towns)

“The Lutheran Church has during its entire history cultivated a service with prescribed forms for prayers, responses, versicles, and other elements of joint worship. Of the Congregations of the [Missouri Synod] it may be affirmed that they have a liturgical form of public worship. But looking at the body as a whole and remembering that an essential mark of a liturgical church body is uniformity, one hesitates to list the Missouri Synod among the liturgical churches. . . . The situation here can best be described in the phrase at the head of this essay. We have liturgical chaos, a confusion which is not at the present time giving way to order and uniformity, but which is growing worse confounded.”

That paragraph was written by Theodore Graebner in 1933 about the Missouri Synod of his day. It could have been written in the 1980s or 1990s as well. But it does not accurately describe the Missouri Synod of the 2020s. The immense success that *Lutheran Service Book* has enjoyed since its release in 2006 has given us more liturgical unity than we have ever had. This is especially true of small town churches. You would have to search far and wide for a small town LCMS church that used neither the 3-Year nor the 1-Year lectionary; almost all of them utilize a setting of the Divine Service or a service of prayer (Matins, Prayer and Preaching, etc.) from *LSB*. The few who don’t are just using the settings in their original forms from *TLH* or *LW*.

Lutheran Service Book is a masterpiece of church leadership. It self-consciously tried to bring our church members together by including both lectionaries and the most popular services from the 1941 and 1982 hymnals with a nod to the 1969 and 1998 worship supplements. My hat goes off to the men who provided such laudable service to our church!

When I arrived at my church in 2005, the Worship Wars were in the last throes of their “hot” phase. My circuit brethren were abuzz with the controversy of the last few consecutive district pastors’ conferences. In those days, the circuits rotated

chairmanship of the conference worship schedule. At the fall conference, one pastor might put on a contemporary worship demonstration. He would import his congregation's praise band, ditch the vestments, and lead the pastors in a liturgy of his own devising. The following spring a pastor from another circuit led them in a fully-chanted rendition of *TLH* page 15 complete with chasuble, elevation, and genuflection. The afternoon service was Evening Prayer with incense.

Like a lot of young guys, my first stint of extra-parish service was as a member of the planning committee for the district pastors' conference. I took my place just as *LSB* was hitting the pews. There were six of us elected from around the district as well as the district president. He proposed a change from our previous practice. What if the committee took over leading the worship for the conference and we just used anything that was in the new hymnal? Peace immediately ensued. And that peace has been with us ever since.

A similar process played itself out, with various degrees of intensity, across our Synod. Especially among small town congregations, *LSB* has ushered in an era of shared liturgical experience and expectations. A variety of practice still exists, of course. There are still outliers and there always will be. There are even people who absolutely insist that mission requires that we worship like this, while others insist faithfulness to the Lutheran heritage means we must worship like that. But when we come together for circuit, district, or Synod events we all worship from *LSB* and generally follow its rubrics.

It is hard for me to express to men who have recently graduated from our seminaries just what a sea change (and a blessing!) this has been.

This is not to say that there won't be any controversy concerning worship in your small town parish. Small town people are conservative. This means that they like what they are used to. They have a strong bias toward "what we have always done." If you are a strong believer in the benefits of utilizing historic Lutheran worship practices and your congregation got accustomed to a blended or contemporary worship service in the

1980s, then you have the potential for some controversy in your future. According to the conservative people in your parish who are in their 30s, 40s and 50s: the blended 10:30 a.m. service is “what we have always done!” If you want to move them toward the hymnody, liturgy, and rubrics as printed in *LSB*, then you will have some patient work ahead of you.

It might be cold comfort for you to hear that your work will be nowhere near as challenging as similar work would have been in the 1990s: but there it is. We are more unified in worship practice than we have been at any time in our history thanks to *LSB* becoming an expected norm (especially in small town churches).

The promises made in the name of contemporary worship in the 1980s and 1990s went largely unfilled in small town America. The gurus of American Evangelicalism assured American Protestants that the only way to reach today’s people was through the praise band and newly composed liturgies. Whatever the successes or failures of this outlook in the suburbs, in small town America, it just didn’t matter much one way or the other in terms of congregational “success.” Small town Americans endured the ebb and flow of pastors who came through their congregations pushing one style of worship or another. The unchurched masses in rural and small town America never did come flooding in when a church changed its worship style one way or the other. In small town America, the “success” of the parish had much more to do with the unity of the parish and the work ethic of the pastor.

I say all this as a man who has been and continues to be an advocate of the historic forms of Lutheran worship. I use the 1-Year Lectionary and I chant the service (and on Epiphany and Easter, I chant the Gospel lesson as well). My mom sews all my chasubles and I’m convinced that genuflecting has kept my joints limber. But I don’t kid myself into thinking that this is what has made my parish “successful.”

I can tell you exactly why my church is a healthy, thriving place. It has nothing to do with me. Early in my time of service here, I wanted to move the parish to weekly communion. I wanted to do this for two chief reasons. First of all, I think this is the best pastoral practice given the realities of modern American life.

People have to work weekends; or they work shift work; or they travel for recreation and sports. Whatever the reason, I have many parishioners who might miss a couple weeks (or more) in a row due to circumstances at least somewhat out of their control. I think it would be a real pity for such folks to go without communion for six, eight, or twelve weeks in a row because they keep getting unlucky and landing in church only on non-communion Sundays. In the second place, our Confessions state that every-Sunday communion is the historic practice of our church. I value the wisdom of my fathers in the faith and want to do what they did.

So in the early months of my tenure here I took the elders through an extensive study of the benefits of offering Communion every week. At the culmination of this study, as I was leading the elders through a long handout I had made summarizing all my arguments, I glanced around the room at them as I made my case. Most eyes were downcast. Faces were stony. I was sure this was not going well. I finished up my presentation and said, “Well, gentlemen, what do you think?”

Silence ensued for a long beat. Finally, the most extroverted of my elders said, “Well, Pastor, long ago this board of elders figured out that having a pastor is a lot like having a wife: she’s gonna do what she wants to anyway, so you might as well get on board.”

These men wanted their church to thrive. They trusted that the Synod had provided them a good man. They could see that he sincerely believed in the direction that he wanted to lead the parish and that he had his reasons for it. That was good enough for them. At that moment I was instantly humbled with the weight of the responsibility given to me. These men assumed my faithfulness and good will. They trusted me just because I was their pastor. I had better live up to that as much as I was able! I have found that as long as I have tried to do that, they have always had my back.

It is that attitude among the laity that makes my church a wonderful place to serve. And I have seen this attitude all across our Synod, especially in small towns. If that attitude does not exist right off the bat where you serve, it is probably because the

congregation is “once bitten, twice shy” due to a rocky pastorate in her past. Keep demonstrating your good will, your faithfulness, and your sincerity and in a shorter time than you might now think, I bet they will come around.

So when it comes to worship practice in a small town LCMS church, you are most likely to find the liturgy, hymnody, and rubrics of *LSB* along with some local variation. In my congregation, they are happy to accept a more ceremonial incarnation of the *LSB* services. They have even come to appreciate it. But again, I have no illusions: a pastor with a more “low church” approach to the *LSB* services would be just as well accepted, loved, and appreciated as I have been. What they desire is sincerity, faithfulness, and hard work. When they find those things in a pastor, small town Lutherans are eager to support him and his leadership for their congregation in worship matters as in all other aspects of parish life.

A Dearth of Church Musicians

One of the most persistent challenges in small town ministry can be finding an organist (or pianist) to lead worship. If you are lucky enough to have one now, you should give that person a raise! If you are struggling to fill the organ bench every week, I can offer you advice for both the short term and the long term.

A living human being playing the organ to lead the living voices of the people in worship will always be the gold standard for our worship. Yet where that is not available in the short term, there are now options for technology to fill the gap. I know congregations that use both Concordia Organist (from CPH) and Church Music Solutions (owned and operated by an LCMS organist). Both work well after an initial investment of time and effort for training.

For the longer term, you will need to raise up musicians from within. This can be as simple as paying for the piano and organ lessons of willing church members, and as involved as starting a David’s Harp chapter in your congregation. This is a wonderful

organization that can help your congregation use music lessons as both a service to the church and an outreach to the community.

Worship as the Church Itself

The fullest expression of the Body of Christ here on earth is the congregation gathered for worship. The congregation you serve is really the congregation at worship. Of course there are folks who are sick and shut-in and they are also part of the church: that is why the pastor goes the extra mile to bring church to them. These folks are saddened by their inability to get to the worship service precisely because they feel that they are missing the fullest expression of what it means to be the Body of Christ on earth. The congregation that gathers for worship simply is the congregation.

So likewise, the pastor in the worship service is executing the fullest expression of his office. It is here in worship that he is teaching the Word and administering the Sacraments to the congregation. There is no other gathering that even comes close. By his careful preparation and faithful action he is demonstrating love, service, and leadership for the church. Therefore both the pastor and the laity should cherish their roles in the church's worship and seek to adorn the worship service with beauty and song.

7 THE FUTURE OF SMALL TOWN MINISTRY

In previous chapters I've already mentioned the demographic realities and cultural headwinds pushing against Christianity in general and small town churches in particular. I've laid out the problems every small town church and pastor are likely to face and passed along some advice for how to confront those challenges (Chapter 2). In this final chapter, I want to approach the issue of the future of small town ministry in general. Where should small town churches focus their efforts in the coming years?

A Strand of Three Cords is Not Easily Broken. This bit of wisdom from Solomon (Ecclesiastes 4:13) will be increasingly relevant for small town ministry in the 21st century. Pastors and congregations in small towns should be looking for more and more opportunities to partner with each other for works of ministry. This doesn't only mean dual and tri-point parishes, although those will continue to be more and more relevant in small town ministry. Even if your congregation is capable of supporting a full-time pastor on her own, there may be any number of other areas where a partnership with other small town congregations will be a benefit to you. For example, consider the clerical tasks of your congregation. Many small town parishes would benefit from sharing one office and one secretary. In most of our small town congregations, the expensive office computer, printer, and photocopier are only used once or twice a week to print up bulletins and handouts for Sunday School. Congregations

could make better use of mission dollars by pooling their resources in this regard.

Two Weird Tricks to Get an Active Youth Group. Those are examples of partnership on either end of the spectrum, from full integration in a dual parish to simply sharing resources like photocopiers. The biggest gains for ministry for your congregation are likely to fall in between. That was certainly the case for our congregation when it came to youth group. Early on in my service here we tried to restart the youth group. Like many small town congregations, what had once been a thriving Walther League back in the 1950s and 60s had dwindled and finally withered by the end of the 90s. The problem was a lack of critical mass. Sure, we had eight or so high school-aged kids, but what were the odds on any given night that all of them could show up for youth group? Between homework, sports practices, and jobs, how many would actually come? Half? What if it was only three? And then what if one is a girl and two are boys? It's not a recipe for success.

So our youth group restart floundered on the rocks of critical mass: we tried, but we just couldn't get it going. Several years after that first attempt, another group of parents saw the need for their kids to have Lutheran friends and a space for them to get together... and it floundered again.

Finally, about five years ago, we got it right by striking out in partnership with two other area congregations. Between the three of us, we could have the critical mass we needed. That's the first "weird trick" to get your youth group up and running again: you need a critical mass of kids. We accomplished this not only by joining together with other area congregations, but also by expanding our Walther League (we've brought back the name!) to include grades 7-12. It works well: after the initial kickball game or open gym time, we do devotions and then have more free-form activity time. The younger and older kids all find each other and the wide age range works well.

The other "weird trick" to make youth ministry really take off is *a dedicated space*. We are the smallest congregation in this

partnership for youth group, but what we can offer is a dedicated space. By means of a generous bequest from a Walther Leaguer of yesteryear, we were able to refurbish one of our classrooms to be the youth group room: a pool table, foosball, ping pong, dart board, a couple couches, and a TV in a dedicated space is all it takes. Once we had those two things (a critical mass and a dedicated space) our youth group really took off. Our local area Lutheran kids now have a time and place each week where they can develop and deepen friendships with one another. It's an invaluable part of our church's ministry that never would have happened without partnering with other area churches.

Depending upon how isolated your local Lutheran geography is, maybe your multi-congregation youth group will only be able to meet monthly or even quarterly. Do it anyway: the harder it is to get together, the more it is needed! I've come to see this as a vital area of ministry for our church. Teenagers today have never been more isolated due, ironically enough, to the widespread use of phones and social media. They have never needed real friendships with their fellow Lutherans more than they need them today. My own kids have benefited from this immensely and I know our parishioners are benefiting as well.

Be a “Plus One” Congregation. In the coming years, it will be increasingly important for small town churches to look for opportunities to partner with each other. Our joint youth group is only one example of an area of ministry that benefits from working together. Besides partnerships, I see another aspect of ministry that is common to small town congregations that are healthy and thriving: a focus on service above and beyond what might be thought of as the minimum. Every congregation is called to gather around the Word of God and rightly distribute and receive His Sacraments. But it is precisely by doing these things that congregations are inspired to do something beyond: to be what I call a “plus one” congregation.

Every congregation is called to gather for worship, preach the Word in its purity, conduct the Sacraments in accord with the Gospel, build up her members with active discipleship, and invite

neighbors to “come and see” what Jesus is doing in their midst. It’s been my experience that healthy congregations that are doing this also feel driven to do at least one other Big Thing together. I call this the “plus one.” A congregation’s “plus one” might be a day school or preschool. Or maybe it is hosting that joint youth group for the other area congregations. Or maybe your congregation’s “plus one” is being involved in LCMS Disaster Response or sponsoring a missionary. In our congregation the “plus one” has grown and multiplied to be a “plus two” and soon maybe a “plus three” (our tuition program to send our parish’s kids to K-8 Lutheran school, hosting our area joint youth group, and now we are looking into a further community outreach program based on cleaning up vacant properties).

I’m excited about the future of our small town congregation. We will continue to have the same sort of challenges that other small town churches in the Midwest have: our community is not really growing, the culture is very much against Christianity, etc. But by focusing on delivering the Word of God to our parishioners (discipleship), inviting others in our community to “come and see” (outreach), partnering with other area Lutheran churches, and continuing to look for opportunities to go above and beyond in our service (those “plus one,” “plus two,” and “plus three” ministries), we have found that our parishioners continue to grow in their faith and thereby our church continues to go from strength to strength. The key is putting the Word of God first in all that we do. For our sufficiency is not from ourselves but from God (II Corinthians 3:5). I believe that every small town Lutheran church will likewise thrive in their own community by grasping on to God’s Word in faith and striking out with confidence in the Lord.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Heath R. Curtis has been serving as a parish pastor in Illinois since graduating from CSL (M.Div.) and Washington University (MA Classics) in 2004. Through the years he has utilized his spare time in various endeavors alongside his parish duties: as Manager of Stewardship Ministry for the LCMS; as assistant editor for Johann Gerhard's *Theological Commonplaces*; as a translator for the ongoing Luther's Works project; as an adjunct professor of theology (CUC); and as the instructor in Latin and Greek for Wittenberg Academy. He is a regular guest on *Issues, Etc.* and a frequent speaker at conferences around the Synod. His recent books include *Stewardship for the Care of Souls* (with co-author Rev. Dr. Nathan Meador; Lexham Press); *Five Things You Can Do to Live a Jesus-Centered Life* (CPH); *Stewardship Under the Cross: Stewardship for Confessional Lutheran Parishes* (lcms.org/stewardship); and *Telling People What to Think: A Concise Homiletics for Lutheran Parish Pastors* (amazon.com).

Reading Notes:

