

# Caring for Souls: People Matter



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# Caring for Souls: People Matter

The brown paper bag just gets in the way. I can't slide the milk out of the fridge and need to reach awkwardly to grab the pickle jar. The bag has appeared enough that I know what is in it, and realize it doesn't belong to me or anyone in my family. It belongs to Ronnie, a friend of our family and the gratefully grinning recipient of the bag and its contents. He doesn't have a refrigerator, or a home for that matter. I slide my arm in the fridge and the brown paper bag drops to the floor, catapulting its contents at my feet. Ugh! The mess metaphors my family's efforts to "remember the poor" (Galatians 2:10).

Caring for Ronnie is messy.

Not in a dirty, unkempt sense like he's unclean, but in terms of my own inconvenient discomfort. Like brown paper bags taking up valuable space in my fridge and then dumping themselves all over my clean floor. Like wondering if I'm going about my business with Ronnie appropriately because his world and my world are worlds apart. Like the priest and the Levite discovered about the man who "fell into the hands of robbers...stripped...of his clothes, beat...half dead" (Luke 10:30). Is he beyond help? How does this work? What about the rules of ceremonial uncleanness and cultural norms? How can I really help, even if this person needs my help?

Messy. Not the person but the situation. And since the situation involves a person, let's call it a relationship. There Ronnie stands conspicuously at the stoplight. I remember the first time I rolled down my window after more than a few times looking the other way to avoid eye contact. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Ronnie."

"Can I pray for you?"

"Thank you so much, yes, please pray for me. Thank you." The light turned green and I waved a friendly goodbye.

My plan: Give him nothing and test his response. Would he argue, begging for at least some quick cash? Would he get grumpy? Ronnie's smile and polite response demonstrated otherwise, at least for now. Sometimes I just talk to Ronnie and I wonder if he's testing me because he asks things like, "How's Mrs. Lindemann?" Sometimes I pack extra bag lunch items for him. Sometimes I give him a little cash. Other people at church do the same, and occasionally they ask me if they should be doing anything differently. So I took Ronnie to lunch this spring and asked him what I should tell people at church when they ask how they can help him. He responded, "They can pray for me."

"What else?"

"I can do odd jobs, you know. Clean out garages. Rake. Walk dogs. Just tell 'em to hand me a slip of paper with their phone number and I'll get a hold of 'em."

"How will you get to their house?"

"Take the bus." So, maybe Ronnie isn't just begging for money, or pity for that matter. Conspicuously absent in his reply: "Gimme cash," with a sad sob story that follows. But it doesn't

make things any easier. This relationship with Ronnie is teaching me that sometimes building relationships as bridges for caring, gospel ministry is messy. Here's what I mean: there are times when I'm fine with driving right past Ronnie in my climate-controlled vehicle to my climate-controlled house without even a wave, as if I don't know him; am I being callously selfish or coolly responsible? Sometimes when I give him cash I flip through the ones, fives, tens, and an occasional twenty in my wallet, but I've never given him a twenty (instead saving those for me, the guy with a full-time job and closets and cupboards overstuffed with daily bread). I hope to have more time to feed his soul even as I feed his body, but that requires more than a quick greeting at the stoplight, and I always find that I'm due somewhere when I encounter Ronnie. I'm a busy man. Are the stoplight visits even worthwhile for the care of his soul? And can I regard them as "pastor" time or rather the Christian calling I received at my baptism? Finally, I've become so intentional about this relationship that I dismiss all the other underprivileged people who stand on that corner when Ronnie is somewhere else, and most any corner for that matter. I want to cultivate a relationship, a bridge of caring. But I can't build bridges with all of the poor and homeless.<sup>1</sup> It's a quality vs. quantity argument and I confess that may not have this right.<sup>2</sup>

So I think about these things, take them to my Father in prayer, and share them with you today precisely because they are messy. And that's okay. I'd rather be messy than merciless. "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat" (Matthew 25:35). I'd rather err on the side of trying to care and botching it up, than not caring at all. I'd rather respond wisely and responsibly than indiscriminately enable bad behavior, especially if I'll be seeing Ronnie often and this is not an emergency. It would be so much easier to toss Ronnie a couple bucks once in a while and drive away glad that I've done my duty. But our Master and Teacher never told his followers that caring for souls is supposed to be easy. Actually, he insisted it will be messy. "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Matthew 5:41). "I am sending you out like lambs among wolves" (Luke 10:3). "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34).

That reminds me of the pastoral axiom, "The ministry would be easy if it weren't for people." Isn't that the truth? We could create policy manuals, code books, and software programs that spell out the business of God with no need for alignment or adjustment because it all remains concisely controlled. Such would be our invention, however, not God's. God created Adam and Eve in the holiness he chose for them, then called them to the same holiness he wanted them to choose for themselves. And things got messy. It could have been so much easier if God had not allowed them to be people. Likewise the ministry in our churches and schools, the partnership among us in our synod, and the vocations to which each of us has been called could be so much cleaner, more convenient, and less confusing if we did not have to deal with people as people. This, however, is not the ministry of spiritual care to which God has called us.

Caring for souls means caring for people, because every soul on earth this side of eternity is embodied in humanity. If anyone could have bypassed human nature and directly cared for souls, it was Jesus Christ himself. However, consider his ministry, beginning with his own incarnation. His active obedience healed and helped people. In his parables he taught about people and for people.

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<sup>1</sup> One of my friends, a successful businessman in the Twin Cities, mentors three homeless men, developing friendships with them. He takes them to his athletic club where they can shower and join him for lunch, he even tutors them so he both teaches them to fish and gives them fish, feeding them for both a day and a lifetime. To do this well, he can't do it for every homeless person in the Cities. This is his cup of cold water (Matthew 10:42).

<sup>2</sup> For another approach that focuses more on congregational programs and activities for the underprivileged, try *101 Ways to Help People in Need*, a little paperback by Steve and Janie Sjorgren with encouraging insight into the culture of the homeless and a variety of practical, meaningful ideas for serving them (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002).

His full humanity participating in the work of redemption even unto death, his resurrection appearances to his friends, and his real body and blood still given in the sacrament. Jesus cares about humanness—his own and that of every soul. People matter. No wonder the crowds were “amazed at his teaching” (Mark 11:18).

Relationships, as messy as they can be, build bridges for spiritual care. Might there be room in our hearts and memories to appreciate this just a little more today, and in our minds and plans to gain some fresh insight as those called to care for souls? To that end, the presentation of today’s essay will be both devotional and instructional, both reflective and interactive, practical, and of course relational. Besides the footnoted text, you will find references to supplemental material either in the appendices or in the Bible study that will accompany this essay.<sup>3</sup>

## RELATE

Your neighbor:

### Today’s need for relationships

It can never be said the Adele Gaboury’s neighbors were less than responsible. When her front lawn grew hip-high, they had a local boy mow it down. When her pipes froze and burst, they had the water turned off. When the mail spilled out the front door, they called the police. The only thing they didn’t do was check to see if she was alive.

She wasn’t.

Police climbed her crumbling brick stoop, broke in the side door of her little blue house, and found what they believed to be the 73-year-old woman’s skeletal remains sunk in a 5-foot-high pile of trash, where they had apparently lain, perhaps for as long as four years.<sup>4</sup>

Isolation is becoming popular in America. 7 in 10 Americans don’t know their neighbors.<sup>5</sup> So the chances are quite good that the family walking through your church doors for the first time is lonely. Busy, yes, but lonely. Homebound shut-ins aren’t the only lonely anymore. Besides isolationism, its close cousin, individualism, contributes to a lack of community in society and even in churches. Consider what a litigious society we have become, zealous for individual rights over community responsibilities, how career advancement trumps company loyalty, and relative truth redefines absolute truth. Sure, Americans join teams and organizations like churches, but these might often be described as a collection of individuals where people are a single part of a larger crowd, not a connected component of a unified group.

Perhaps a greater need for relationships is conceived not out there in the promiscuous world but within the wombs of our own churches. That is, the visible church. In an attempt to deal with the messiness that people contribute to the business of caring for souls, the visible church structures organizationally, budgets fiscally, creates hierarchy, pays bills, invokes policies, and maintains buildings. All for the sake of peace and good order. “It is so much easier to build things than people. It is easier to see progress and to know what works and what doesn’t when we deal

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<sup>3</sup> The most important supplemental material may very well be your own “action list,” as you fill in some of the interactive text boxes during the essay, and take them home for personal follow through.

<sup>4</sup> (Frazee, Randy. *The Connecting Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001, 109). Originally a story in the *Boston Globe*, “Years After Neighbors Last Saw Her, Worcester Woman Found Dead in Home,” quoted in Jacqueline Olds, Richard Schwartz, and Harriet Webster. *Overcoming Loneliness in Everyday Life*. Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1996)

<sup>5</sup> (Frazee 2001, 33)

with the tangible tasks of making things. Things don't resist our helping interventions in the way in which people so often do. Unquestionably dealing with souls is more demanding than dealing with things."<sup>6</sup> This machine of an institution, as institutions tend to do, becomes the end rather than the means. It exists for its own sake rather than for the sake of the people of whom it is composed. Policies and procedures dominate. Robert's rules order the meeting magisterially, not ministerially. "Thus it makes lists, labels people, assigns roles, and solves problems. But a solved life is a reduced life. These tightly buttoned-up people never take great faith risks or make convincing love talk. They deny or ignore the mysteries and diminish human existence to what can be managed, controlled, and fixed."<sup>7</sup> The organization even equates itself with the invisible church and claims promises from God's Word never intended for any human institution no matter how closely connected to the heavenly kingdom. And the institutional agenda must succeed at all costs, even at the cost of hurting the people it is supposed to help.<sup>8</sup> Might the visible nature of our religion be getting in the way of its invisible one? What happened to caring for souls?

The Scriptures direct us to a model for the care of souls: the shepherd. Isolationism, individualism, institutionalism, and other barriers to relationships find their answer in such care. In his great parable of the lost sheep, our Good Shepherd defines the immense worth of a person, the searching love of the shepherd, and the joyful relief of a straying soul now found. "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep" (Luke 15:6). *My* lost sheep. Despite our wandering into pastures owned by other ranchers, and even enjoying it, our Good Shepherd never considers us to be someone else's responsibility or objects of care. In this we also rejoice with relief, for we have strayed.

The loneliness of our own isolationism has run away to the paths of dangerous predators, as if seeking companionship with them is a good idea. We "wandered over mountain and hill and forgot [our] own resting place" (Jeremiah 50:6). The rebellion of our own individualism has acknowledged but dismissed the voice of our Good Shepherd, preferring instead the self-sufficiency and independence of our doing that somehow gains God's favor. "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6). Called from sheep to shepherd, we've sold out the souls of sheep under our care for the sake of corporate greed and institutionalism, deserving the demoted title "hired hand" in the rebuke of Jesus: "The hired hand...abandons the sheep and runs away...because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep" (John 10:12,13). We assume that our visible church always operates with the blessing of God and is a blessing to people, but he says, "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture" (Jeremiah 23:1)! A broken relationship with God is our biggest problem.

So we begin our study of caring for souls as rescued sheep and repentant shepherds. Rather than redirecting our fears of isolationism, individualism, and institutionalism into blaming, denying, or masking—"Surely, not I"—we hear our Good Shepherd's voice and bleat for him to come in his

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<sup>6</sup> (Benner, David G. *Care of Souls: Revisioning Christian Nurture and Counsel*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998, 206)

<sup>7</sup> (Peterson, Eugene H. *The Contemplative Pastor*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989, 64). Note: Eugene Peterson's writings poetically pursue the authentic calling of pastors and congregations in gospel ministry. His challenges are most often appropriate and scriptural insight colorfully compelling, worthy of reading and referencing. However, the hearty inclusion of Peterson's voice in this essay is not intended as whole scale endorsement of everything he says. The following review of Peterson by Prof. Rich Gurgel is worth printing here. "Peterson is quite postmodern (for example: he often displays a loss of a confidence in propositions to communicate changeless truth) and neo-orthodox/existentialist (for example: the Bible really only becomes the Word of God as we experience it)...He speaks of 'living the gospel' which easily suggests that the gospel is at its heart something for us *to do* rather than something for us *to believe*" (Gurgel, Richard. "Grow in Grace!" Southeastern Wisconsin District Convention, June 8, 2010, 9).

<sup>8</sup> Institutionalism is sometimes diagnosed best by those outside of the institution, and is one reason why the unchurched are unchurched. Before we dismiss their excuse: "I don't like organized religion," as faulty bias, we do the ministry much good by testing their complaint.

bleeding compassion. “You, my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are people, and I am your God,” he who never stopped owning us soothes in reassuring tones (Ezekiel 34:31). “The LORD is my shepherd,” we who never wanted to leave him reply with a godly pride in belonging to the best, the only, the Savior. “I will fear no evil, for you are with me...My cup overflows...Goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life” (Psalm 23:4-6). The Good Shepherd has laid down his life for the sheep, and taken it up again for the sheep. We live! With him. For him. We listen to his voice. And he says, “Take care of my sheep” (John 21:16). Christ’s love. Our calling. Caring for souls.

## Jesus washes feet, but not just feet

### THINK, PAIR, SHARE

**Bigger church:** Describe a time when you appreciated your church

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**Smaller church:** Complete this statement: My church \_\_\_\_\_ by...

She sat in my office and unburdened her anxiety as properly as she could without faithless complaining. I’d say she performed admirably. “Lord, grant me such a spirit of patient perseverance,” I thought. This was a grieving widow, though disturbed she was not distressed. Her gritty faith wouldn’t allow it. But her faith was being tested, even as she submitted her body for test after test after test. Symptoms had developed, strange symptoms that doctors couldn’t diagnose. They ruled out one malady after another but weeks turned into months and still no name for what she was experiencing. Fear and frustration fought hard against faith. Where was the answer? What if...? How come...? Nobody knew. We visited some time later and I saw a burden lifted. Her face lit up as she related the story about a particular doctor. A woman. A foreigner. She took time telling me how this doctor spent 40 minutes asking her personal questions the other doctors had not; she listened to her heartfelt concerns; she sympathized with her plight; she was with her in the moment, not just at an appointment. “I told her that she is an answer to my prayers, that I

had been asking the Lord for help and healing.” The doctor hugged her and replied, “I, too, am Christian.” Then she followed up the next day with a phone call. Still no diagnosis. No more promise for physical healing than when her patient walked into the office. But this Christian widow in my office enjoyed a relief, which she expressed as a blessing from God. She felt that someone cared, understood, finally took up her cause with empathy<sup>9</sup>—and Christ like empathy at that. This endocrinologist performed heart surgery by opening her own heart and touching the heart of this widow, healing her in unexpected yet much appreciated ways.

The church has the gospel, the best medicine in the world offering the ultimate healing of salvation, yet even the Great Physician understood that the gospel is administered to embodied souls. To people with life experiences, with learning disabilities, with personalities and biases, who speak other dialects or even languages, who hurt, who feel, who breathe, who fear. Having the gospel is not caring for souls. Having the gospel and having souls is not caring for souls. Having the gospel and applying it to people is caring for souls. One friend who is a pastor shared with me that in a neighborhood canvassing effort, he found a former member of his church. She had joined another church after her husband died. That church, familiar to her family, visited her multiple times a week for multiple weeks after the funeral and this pastor’s church visited her once, inviting

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<sup>9</sup> “Empathy is the ability to enter into the experience of others, or, better, receive their experience as they share it with you, holding it within you in such a manner as not to confuse it with your own” (Benner 1998, 139).

her to remain faithful in worship and Bible study. They had the gospel. She had a need for the gospel. Its application, on this occasion, was a prescription for personal visits.<sup>10</sup>

“Putting *care* back in health care” is a marketing slogan that touches on a truth relevant to our Christian calling. Caring for souls, like caring for health, is more than transactional. It is relational. The souls to whom the church administers the means of grace belong to people. Therefore, people matter.

“Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power.”<sup>11</sup> The Father had put all things in the hands that washed the disciples’ feet. The powerful Son of God got up from the table like he had left the heavenly banquet to come to this earth. The powerful Son of God took off his outer clothing like he had put aside the use of his divine majesty. The powerful Son of God wrapped a towel around his waist like he had wrapped himself in human flesh. The powerful Son of God washed and dried the disciples’ feet like he had brought *his* humanity to touch the filthiest of *our* humanity, our grievous sins. We see in the redemptive humiliation of our Savior God his caring for souls that belong to people.

In the first century it was a friendly courtesy to wash the feet of those who would visit your home. The sweaty sandals as footwear and the dirt of the dusty roads made for less-than-appealing ankles and toes exposed during a meal. Normally a servant would be assigned the common task of washing the feet of the guests upon entry. Here in the private room Jesus had arranged, there was no servant. So the disciples entered and then gathered at the table with the slightly awkward embarrassment of neglecting a custom of the day. No servant? Well, Peter and John had arranged for the room, so they should wash feet. Nobody volunteered. The awkward moment lingered. Then the servant showed himself. The mighty Lord Jesus, the powerful Son of God, washed their feet. Maybe he started with Judas, or perhaps he washed a few others as the moment became more awkward. None of them argued or interfered, nor did any take up the task. Yet they all wondered if it should be this way. Somebody should do something.

“[Jesus] came to Simon Peter, who said to him, ‘Lord, are *you* going to wash my feet’?”<sup>12</sup> Peter could see Matthew or Andrew or any of the others washing his feet. But not Jesus. “Lord,” Peter addresses him with a title superior to “Rabbi,” emphasizing the greatness of Jesus as the glorious Son of God who will save us all by crushing our enemies, not by washing our feet.

“Jesus replied, ‘You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.’” Jesus accepts Peter’s innocent interference as an ignorant mistake. He simply didn’t know any better. He’ll connect the dots later. Do you hear more encouraging love in Jesus’ reply than disappointed rebuke? He doesn’t fault or shame Peter for asking what was on the minds of all the disciples, for expressing his curious concern about a Savior he so dearly loved. “It’s okay. I know what I’m doing. Yes, I am the Lord of all, and I’ll always be the Lord of all, but now is the time for me to be the Servant of all to suffer and die for sins.” This is Jesus’ willing choice. Nobody is forcing him to the cross. He chooses the cross. He chooses the dirty feet of messy people.

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<sup>10</sup> “Widows and widowers frequently complain that after their spouse’s death, friends and other concerned people seem reluctant to talk about the deceased. Contrary to what you might think, most widowed people want to talk about the significant other they have lost” (Haugk, Kenneth C. *Christian Caregiving: A Way of Life*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984, 41). The church where this pastor serves now administers its own support group called *GriefShare* <http://www.griefshare.org/>.

<sup>11</sup> εἰς τὰς χεῖρας - literally “put all things into his hands.” The account of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet is in John 13:1ff.

<sup>12</sup> Κύριε, σὺ μου νίπτεις τοὺς ποδας - the “you” is emphasized in the sentence structure

“No,” said Peter, “You shall never wash my feet.” “Jesus, you should be busy battling the devil and the Romans at that, crushing my enemies, defeating all those evildoers out there and setting up your throne forever! You’re so above washing feet, especially my feet.” And Peter, who called Jesus “Lord,” asserts himself as a lord, demanding a different kind of savior, contending for only greatness—not grace. “Washing feet? Jesus, you and I are both better than that.”

Better than what, my friend? Can you be willing to find yourself, with me, in Peter’s objection? Who has not been served because I am too good for them? Who has not been loved because I am too busy for them? What has not been done because I’m too important? What has not been prayed because I don’t have time? How often have I missed following Jesus because I don’t find him on my path of greatness as he walks his path of humility and misses me, because I lifted my chin so high that I couldn’t find him while he was humbly washing feet? Why do I struggle to let the mighty Lord also be my suffering Servant, touching my dirty, filthy sins?...Saving me.

“Jesus answered, ‘Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.’” Jesus isn’t concerned about Peter’s feet any more, and doesn’t mention them in his response. He is concerned about Peter as a person, as a sinner in need of saving. “Unless I wash *you*.” And Jesus makes Peter’s having a part with him—being connected to Jesus as his Savior—not depend on anything Peter does but on something Jesus does. “Unless *I* wash you.”

Impulsive Peter quickly jumps to a conclusion, giving up his opposition into the extreme of another eager misunderstanding. He doesn’t hear the answer of spiritual washing in Jesus’ words. “‘Then Lord,’ Simon Peter replied, ‘not just my feet but my hands and my head as well.’”

“Jesus answered, ‘A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean.’”<sup>13</sup> Just as our bodies are clean after we bathe or shower for the day and we only need to wash our hands before we eat, so we are (and remain by faith) spiritually clean when Jesus has washed away our sins by his suffering and death. We need “only a little washing up,” so to speak, through the confession and absolution in the liturgy of worship, or asking forgiveness from someone we hurt, or praying with repentance to God.

The suffering Servant stoops from his eternal, glorious throne in heaven to the sandy floor and sweaty feet of a room filled with his own fickle followers. His caring for souls is so extreme, so loving to the end, that it makes room to save us, and now leaves room to compel us.

“I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master...now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” If any of his disciples think we are too great to stoop down for menial tasks in serving others, we can only do so by thinking of ourselves as greater than Jesus. Jesus has washed our feet, that part of us most dirtied by the sinful world, and so he purifies our souls. Today, with our feet still on this earth, we stand clean, we walk clean, and we are blessed when we wash the feet of others, caring for their souls.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> You are clean. Everywhere. “The blood of Jesus...purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). You are clean. Not based on your successful caring for souls but on your faith in the caring for souls in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. “You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 6:11). You are clean. Now and into eternity when it can be said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14).

<sup>14</sup> So then, in what other instances besides washing his disciples’ feet was Jesus caring for souls during his time on this earth? Did his miracles care for souls? All of them, even the physical healings and the providing of bodily nutrition and promoting emotional safety during the storm? Did his teaching care for souls? The parables understood by some but not

“Do as I have done for you...You will be blessed,” Jesus calls us with command and promise.

What can we do to care for souls isolated by the loneliness masked within our overbusy, multitasking, smartphone existence? Invite them to the upper room by caring for them as people—washing their feet and serving them the sacred meal. As Jesus has done for us. And we will be blessed. What can we do to care for souls in our individualized world insisting that their self-wisdom is the best way, their self-awareness the ultimate truth, and their self-sufficiency sufficient for salvation? Become their servants even as they argue that they know and deserve the best seats like the disciples did—washing their feet and gently leading them to see that it’s not all about the individual, but about the suffering Servant and the Church he calls to be one. As Jesus has done for us. And we will be blessed. What can we do to care for souls oh-so-concerned about the institution of the church that the earthly stifles the heavenly? We can challenge ourselves to put the outward organization under the microscope, and where structures or routines have become “rules taught by men” (Isaiah 29:13) “having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:5) we exert the courage to take off the comfortable slippers of these sanctioned systems and scrub between toes with the Savior’s love, there finding genuine caring for souls.

In what ways can we better fulfill our footwashing Shepherd’s calling, “Take care of my sheep...Do as I have done for you”?

## The soul, the body, and spiritual care for people

“The soul makes man different from everything else God created. Man has height, size, and weight. So does a rock. Man takes in nourishment and grows. So does a tree. Man feels and moves about. So does a dog. But man has one thing no other creature has: a soul, which enables man to think spiritual thoughts and perform spiritual actions.”<sup>15</sup> The soul is divinely created life that makes people who we are. In the beginning God breathed “the breath of life” into Adam’s nostrils to make him “a living being” (Genesis 2:7).<sup>16</sup> So the soul is the non-material being in us that is the seat of our life. The Bible credits the soul (or spirit)<sup>17</sup> with our personality and our ability to believe and praise God, and it assigns to the soul our thinking, our willing, and our feeling.<sup>18</sup> It will never cease to exist. This makes the soul more valuable than all. “What good is it for

### STUDY

Refer to Psalm 77:1-12, Appendix A on p. 32 of this essay.

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all? How about his public preaching—was that more of a caring for souls as public proclamation of the means of grace? his fulfillment of prophecy? his temptation and transfiguration? his birth and baptism? his crucifixion, resurrection, ascension? Maybe the better question is: In what instances was Jesus *not* caring for soul? Or the best question: In what different *ways* was Jesus always, ultimately caring for souls?

<sup>15</sup> (Luchterhand, Lyle L. *Man: From Glory to Ashes and Back*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998, 51)

<sup>16</sup> Theologians refer to “the propagation of the soul” since then, and among the religions of the world we can find any of four teachings: **emanationism** (the soul flows from God’s essence), **preexistentism** (all souls were created by God in the beginning and remain in storage until the moment of conception), **creationism** (by a direct act God creates a new soul for every new body separately conceived), and **traducianism** (through the reproductive process resulting in God’s gift of conception a new soul is propagated through parents along with the body). If the first two sound quite New Age and mystical, they are, and lend themselves to endless myths. Only the latter two can be supported with Scripture.

<sup>17</sup> While some prefer that 1) body, 2) soul, and 3) spirit form a trichotomy of a person’s existence, the Scriptures clearly teach a dichotomy that defines a person in terms of 1) body and 2) soul/spirit. The words *soul* and *spirit* refer to one and the same, cf. Ecclesiastes 12:7; Matthew 10:28; James 2:26; 1 Corinthians 5:5, 7:34; 2 Corinthians 7:1; Colossians 2:5.

<sup>18</sup> Psalm 77 continues in the first person singular, as its author interchanges “I” and “my” with “my soul.” The soul is not part of a person. The soul is the person. Without a soul we are clumps of dirt and leftover ashes.

a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:36,37)

As far as our calling on this earth to care for souls, we remember that the soul lives in mutual dependence with the material being, the body, which is the organ through which the soul functions. Like electricity needs a conductor, the soul needs a body. The soul plugs into this world in which it lives through the body's faculties and functions. The fact that each human being consists of body and soul in one person makes caring for people a critical component of caring for souls.<sup>19</sup> Lawns need lawn care. Customers need customer care. Cancer and Parkinson's disease need a cure. Why do souls need care and cure?<sup>20</sup> Jesus explains, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18,19). Release. That's forgiveness.<sup>21</sup> Sins sent away by the saving command of the one with perfect obedience and satisfactory sacrifice.

The heart and core of caring for souls is the forgiveness of sins. Real sins casting a real curse on real people, who turn in repentance to a real Savior. This redemption and release is pronounced upon the entire person, body and soul, and affects the entire person, body and soul, just as Lutheran pastors commit a corpse to its resting place in the ground with the words, "May God the Father, who created this body; may God the Son, who by his blood redeemed this body together with the soul; may God the Holy Spirit, who by Holy Baptism sanctified this body to be his temple; keep these remains to the day of the resurrection of all flesh."<sup>22</sup> The Scriptures promise believers a holistic salvation not fragmented between internal and external, or visible and invisible, or soul and body. "Created of dust and the breath of God, we cannot escape from either."<sup>23</sup> In the beginning of time Adam wasn't complete until the physical was united with the breath of God. At the end of time our bodies will be reunited with our souls on Judgment Day.<sup>24</sup> In between, Jesus, the Great Physician, cared for "the whole man" (John 7:23) in both his teaching and his touching.

Care of souls can thus be understood as the care of persons in their totality, with particular attention to their inner lives. This can never be accomplished by ignoring a person's physical existence or the external world of behavior...Caring for souls is caring for people.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "The English phrase, 'care of souls,' has its origins in the Latin *cura animarum*. While *cura* is most commonly translated as *care*, it actually contains the idea of both care and cure. *Care* refers to actions that are designed to support the well-being of something or someone. *Cure* refers to actions that are designed to restore well-being that has been lost. The Christian church has historically embraced both meanings of *cura* and has understood soul care to involve nurture and support as well as healing and restoration" (Benner 1998, 21).

<sup>20</sup> "Dust you are," the LORD God, both faithful in his love and mighty in his holy zeal, pokes Adam in the chest after he ate from the tree he was commanded not to eat from. "And to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19). Thanks to our first father we are all dead people. "Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin" (Romans 5:12). Our destiny handed down from the first Adam: dirty, rotten corpses. But the second Adam delivered what was promised already in Eden: a new destiny, a new identity, a restored soul. "For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!" (Romans 5:15). And how freely God's gracious gift is given through that one man, Jesus Christ, into poor, broken souls blinded to life and imprisoned by death.

<sup>21</sup> ἀφεσις - this word is often translated "forgiveness," cf. Luke 1:77.

<sup>22</sup> *Christian Worship: Occasional Services*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004, 90

<sup>23</sup> (Benner 1998, 107)

<sup>24</sup> Job knew that. "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (Job 19:25-27)

<sup>25</sup> (Benner 1998, 22,23)

The goal, therefore, of caring for souls is not to renounce the physical as the Gnostic<sup>26</sup> false teachers did, as if trading humanity for divinity. “The task of salvation is not to refine us into pure spirits so that we will not be cumbered with this too solid flesh. We are not angels, nor are we to become angels. The Word did not become a good idea, or a numinous feeling, or a moral aspiration; the Word became flesh... Things matter. The physical is holy.”<sup>27</sup> The one to whom our salvation belongs is both spiritual and physical; his incarnation says so. We who are recipients of his creating, redeeming, and sanctifying are both spiritual and physical. And we do well to remember that those for whom we care—to whom we proclaim the forgiveness of sins through Christ—are both spiritual and physical. “The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God” (Galatians 2:20). Called to take care of sheep in our Shepherd’s flock, we discard and discount neither the body nor the soul.<sup>28</sup>

Where does that leave our church body in our caring for souls? In speaking of relationships are we compromising our theological integrity with anthropological themes? Such is certainly a danger for any church body dipping its toes into the waters of culture in order to reach it with the gospel. We need to be very careful here lest we think we can dive in and not get totally wet. The tools with which Christ has equipped us for gospel ministry that cares for souls are God’s Word and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. So is there a proper place for psychology, and might it be useful to our pastors-in-training? My pastoral theology textbook from seminary days says that “knowledge of psychology and pedagogical principles ... provide [a pastor] with insights which will enable him to size up situations correctly.”<sup>29,30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Gnosticism troubled the church in the postapostolic era. Its followers considered everything material and physical to be evil, a prison that keeps man from returning to his divine source. Salvation, then, was an evolution. The spirit of man must be liberated from his body through knowledge (*gnosis*), so that he can return to the fullness of God. Gnostics denied the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Their God was an impersonal deity. He was remote, never entering directly into human affairs. He was the silent principle of good, with no word of revelation to save sinners (unknown source, from my notes).

<sup>27</sup> (Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* 1989, 68)

<sup>28</sup> “By our practice of spirituality we are not raised to a higher plane above the normal, everyday, bodily life but we receive the Holy Spirit from Christ so that we can live in God’s presence each day of our lives as we deal with people and work, sin and abuse, inconvenience and heartbreak, trouble and tragedy. We are not called to become more spiritual by disengaging from our earthly life... Christian spirituality does not deal with the human mind or human soul in contrast to the body, but with the whole life of those who have faith in Christ and are animated by the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we believe that the eternal Son of God took on a human body to redeem us and to share the Spirit of the Father with us bodily. Luther sums up this discussion of spirituality well in a discussion of the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in His Holy Supper: Thus, all that our body does outwardly and physically, if God’s Word is added to it and it is done through faith, is in reality and in name done spiritually. Nothing can be so material, fleshly, or outward, but it becomes spiritual when it is done in the Word and in faith” (Kleinig, John W. *Grace upon Grace*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008, 23,24); Martin Luther quote from AE 37:92. Kleinig continues by astutely lamenting that spirituality has been largely reduced to religious psychology and, although psychology can help us understand ourselves, it doesn’t give us the full picture “of us as people, let alone of us as Christians. In contrast to psychological self-analysis, this study uses the Sacred Scriptures to investigate how God the Father regards us in Adam and in Christ and what He makes of us with his Holy Spirit.” (Kleinig 2008, 24)

<sup>29</sup> Schuetze, Armin W. and Habeck, Irwin J. *The Shepherd Under Christ*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974, 140

<sup>30</sup> Consider the instructions from an earlier textbook of pastoral theology published in 1932 that influenced both the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods: “In dealing with human beings, diagnosing their particular troubles and ministering to their spiritual welfare, a pastor ought to know that there are such different types of persons... If we are able to recognize the different types of human beings, we can understand the individual human being better, and to understand him better means to be better able to approach and to help him... A pastoral call should be made for the purpose of getting close to the individual, establishing mutual confidence, and speaking to the parishioner in reference to his spiritual needs... He should study the individual church-member in reference to his character, disposition, temperament, opinions, environment, education, friends and acquaintances, occupation, business associates, poverty or wealth, special hobbies, reading, physical condition, etc.” (Fritz, John H. C. *Pastoral Theology*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1932, 203, 185)

Additionally, in Thesis VIII of *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, the lectures of confessional Lutheran hero, C.F.W. Walther, he states, “The Word of God is not rightly divided when the Law is preached to those who are already in terror on account of their sins or the Gospel to those who live securely in their sins.”<sup>31</sup> Walther would have ripped his robe at the religious professionals in Jesus’ day confusing law and gospel by preaching the law to those souls already in terror on account of their sins.<sup>32</sup>

Prostitutes, tax collectors, and criminals enter the kingdom of heaven, even ahead of “righteous” church leaders.<sup>33</sup> Appearance suggests otherwise. However, Christ-like caring for souls relies not on appearance alone. Of course Jesus can read hearts. We who can’t see the invisible church must read *people* as we care for *souls*.<sup>34</sup> The Lutheran middle insists that in caring for souls we practice the latter without neglecting the former. Instead of pitting rites and relationships against each other, as if the venue of caring for souls features a battle between theology and psychology, we strive to connect *people* to *God* by understanding both as accurately as possible. This balance is the basis for Walther’s Thesis VIII, for Jesus’ evangelical approach to “sinners,” and for the seminary delving into dealing with human beings and prompting students’ insight into psychological and pedagogical principles. It is also the reason for pumping cool air conditioning into a people-packed gymnasium on a late July afternoon lest delegates or essayist physically fall asleep, which hinders the proclamation of the gospel. We care for embodied souls and inspired bodies. Such a balance of the divine and human, of spiritual and physical, is not neat and tidy.

Defend sound doctrine according to God’s changeless Word *and* let unrestrained love be the proof of our teaching, lest our wrangling have little to do with Jesus or he with it. Having one thing to say has the advantage of consistency. The more difficult position is for those who say *two* things, not meaning by this timid compromise, but expressing both truths loudly and energetically; that’s when you can make almost everybody angry.<sup>35</sup>

The Lutheran middle gets messy, even, according to the professor, making people angry in the sense of a frustration that we can’t just push the “easy” button or invoke “we’ve always done it this way.” We can’t make caring for souls clean and predictable, totally and theoretically removed from practical humanness. The way the ministry really works, however, is that “week after week, Christ

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<sup>31</sup> Walther supports his thesis by referencing 1 Timothy 1:8-10, and also Jesus’ proclamation of gospel forgiveness to the sinful woman, Zacchaeus, and the thief on the cross. These three were all seen by the Pharisees as unforgivable sinners. (Walther, C.F.W. *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*. Edited by W.H.T. Dau. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929, 1986, 101)

<sup>32</sup> And more than that, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were preaching a gospel to each other and their followers living securely in their sins, but a Christless gospel which was “really no gospel at all” (Galatians 1:7).

<sup>33</sup> Jesus reserved his most scathing condemnations for these church leaders. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees” (Matthew 23:13,15,23,25,27,29, cf. also 16). They were appointed to care for souls and instead “shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces” (23:13). They relied too heavily on appearance, both their own (“Everything they do is done for men to see,” 23:5) and that of others, and it blinded them to the truth. Theirs wasn’t a lack of sincere effort but a lack of humble, repentant faith in the redemptive work of the Savior. “You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are” (23:15). It wasn’t that they didn’t have the right rites, they just abused them with an absence of theological integrity. “You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides!” (23:23,24)

<sup>34</sup> One of my not-so-stellar moments in ministry was administering the means of grace in an inspirational hospital devotion to woman lying in bed, unable to communicate, captivated by my presentation. Unfortunately I didn’t check in with the nurses’ station that visit (always do this!) because Esther had already been dead for two hours.

<sup>35</sup> (Paustian, Mark A. “Unleashing our Calling: Today’s Christians Find Fulfillment in their Vocations.” Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium on Vocation, 2006, 10; previously in his essay, Paustian attributed the Lutheran “two things” to Adolf Koberle in *The Quest for Holiness*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1936, 266-268.)

washes the disciples' dirty feet, handles their very toes, and repeats, 'It is all right, believe it or not, to be people.'"<sup>36</sup>

## Lutheran *Seelsorge*

The German, Lutheran Johannes Muehlhaeuser, our synod's first president, washed feet and handled toes, not only by ministering to people during Milwaukee's cholera epidemic, but with his pastoral heart in the infant years of the Wisconsin Synod.<sup>37</sup> *Sorge* is a German word that, used in a good sense, means care or concern for someone, and in a negative sense, means worry or anxiety. *Seel* means soul, so *die Seelsorge* is the care of souls. There's a mood, a spirit, however, to *Seelsorge* that is pastoral in nature. A shepherd-like approach to ministry. Therefore, *der Seelsorger* became a popular German Lutheran synonym for *der Pastor*.<sup>38</sup> Martin Luther, whom some argue invented the term, left us a legacy of the fatherly, pastoral spirit of Muehlhaeuser, even though Luther's dominating traits sometimes overshadowed it. Luther's was a Lutheran middle, a balance of "pastoral admonition and care (*Seelsorge*; literally, the care of souls) as defining all aspects of pastoral ministry, rather than as a separate specialty of the pastor tied to therapy and personal well-being and separated from the Word and sacrament."<sup>39,40</sup>

Timothy Wengert suggests, in his foreword to *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Pastoral Theology*, that *Seelsorge* contributed to Luther's angst in the posting of the ninety-five theses due to what he observed as "bad preaching and its effects on the people" regarding indulgences. Wengert quotes Luther again: "I regret deeply the false understanding [of the indulgence preachers' sermons] among the people."<sup>41</sup> Thus the ninety-five theses themselves are filled with pastoral concerns for the laity and the preaching of the gospel. Furthermore, "some of

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<sup>36</sup> (Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* 1989, 84)

<sup>37</sup> "The Muehlhaeuser Synod—in its first decade the Wisconsin Synod could well be called that, and it often was. This was so not because Muehlhaeuser sought to rule the small body or to set himself up in a strong hierarchical position as its president. The constitution he drafted would soon be replaced. His mild Lutheranism would soon give way to a strong confessionalism. It was not organizational skill nor a dominating spirit on the part of its founder that caused the new synod to be referred to as the Muehlhaeuser Synod. It was so called because its senior member in age and experience led the young men who joined it with a pastoral heart and with genuine concern...By his fatherly, pastoral spirit, by his practical wisdom and experience, by his humble yet determined zeal for the gospel Muehlhaeuser influenced the synod he founded so that it often was called and in fact to a large extent was the Muehlhaeuser Synod during its first ten years...In 1855 Muehlhaeuser was one of the few pastors of Milwaukee who did not abandon the sick during a cholera epidemic, a fact gratefully remembered by the whole city. At the time of Muehlhaeuser's death, *The Milwaukee Sentinel* paid tribute to his practical concern for people...All of this made it quite natural to call the congregation he founded and served for nearly two decades the 'Muehlhaeuser Church'" (Schuetze, Armin W. "Muehlhaeuser: Founding Father of the Wisconsin Synod." Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file, 5,8).

<sup>38</sup> (Deutschlander, Prof. Daniel M. *Ein Kleines Theologisches Woerterbuch*. 1994.)

<sup>39</sup> (Wengert, Timothy J. *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Pastoral Theology*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009, 4)

<sup>40</sup> The Augustinian influence on his faith, life, and ministry played a role in Luther's *Seelsorge*. "Martin Luther was an Augustinian in the sense that he was a member of the Augustinian Eremites. He entered their Black Monastery at Erfurt on July 17, 1505, at the age of 21. Several other orders maintained houses in that city and its environs. It is not too daring to say that the story of the gospel's course in history would not be the same if the earnest young man had entered one of the others. This was the only order which combined the study of Scripture and of Augustine's writings with dual emphasis on the care of souls and higher education" (Balge, Richard D. "Martin Luther, Augustinian." Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 1).

<sup>41</sup> (Wengert 2009, 6, with footnote references WA Br 1:108-15; LW 48:43-49)

Luther's most poignant writings (beyond those thousands of remarkable sermons) arose directly out of pastoral concerns."<sup>42</sup>

Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering...Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith (Hebrews 13:1-3,7).

So, like Augustine and Luther, Walther and Muehlhaeuser, and the current president of Martin Luther College,<sup>43</sup> we preach the Word and administer the sacraments faithfully. At the same time we love those in our church and synod family, as well as our friends, family, neighbors, the underprivileged, strangers, even our enemies. Depending on the circumstances of care, we may be more involved in one than the other, but such is sometimes difficult to determine as the methods of caring for souls become quite permeable.

As a pastor called by my congregation to administer the means of grace, I must confess that I frequently face this temptation and trap: By virtue of my office, its responsibility and its authority, I focus so intensely on the preparations and operations of administering the means of grace that I forget their *core* that forgives me and others in Christ's love and their *call* to follow the way of Christ's love. My transaction of the process gets in the way of the product, so to speak. It even frustrates my personal, spiritual health while I martyr myself with overbusyness thinking I'm the second savior (who doesn't exist but few people want to tell pastors that). It wields my ordination like a club because I have in my hands, by permission of the people I serve, the calling to above all else ensure the proper administration of the means of grace. Above *all* else? Even love? "Love is for later, for others," the liar whispers to my itching ears. "You are the custodian of the means of grace, and that more than anything needs your attention. Hurry up, you're falling behind." And, religious professional that I am, I hurt the very people Christ entrusts to me, thinking I'm helping them by administering the gospel yet along with it I am administering a loveless trampling of their souls. And then I complain how faithless they can be.<sup>44</sup> I excuse my lovelessness and lack of caring with the lie that I'm *so* responsible for the means of grace

### DISCUSS

**"Nothing is more important than saving souls."** Clarify and explain two opposite extremes reacting to this statement from a transactional point of view or a relational one. Then give an example of what the balance looks like.

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<sup>42</sup> (Wengert 2009, 6,7, A fact demonstrated in a small selection of titles from throughout Luther's career: *Fourteen Consolations for Those Who Labor and Are Burdened* (1520); *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* (1526); *Whether One May Flee from Deadly Pestilence* (1527); *A Simple Way to Pray for a Good Friend [Master Peter the Barber]* (1535); *A Comfort for Women with Whom Things Have Gone Awry during Childbirth* (1542).)

<sup>43</sup> With the pastoral heart of Muehlhaeuser and Luther, the president of Martin Luther College endears himself to students by putting on his shorts and sneakers on a sweltering August afternoon and carrying boxes, fans, blankets, and wardrobes up, up, up to dorm rooms waiting for students. I know this because it's the first thing a lonely mother of a new MLC student mentioned to me last fall when I asked how things were going. Is this not caring for souls? I am not disappointed that the president isn't more directly dispensing the means of grace because I know that, come midwinter when students get squirrely or lonely or fall into other traps of the devil as students do, they can flash back to the sweaty head revealing the pastoral heart of their president. "He really cares." He's not a hierarchical threat. They will be more ready to give him an extra minute and an open heart to receive from him what he knows is the heart of *Seelsorge*—Christ's love. "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

<sup>44</sup> Eugene Peterson quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "A pastor should not complain about his congregation, certainly never to other people, but also not to God. A congregation has not been entrusted to him in order that he should become its accuser before God and men." (Peterson, Eugene H. *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980, 65, footnote attributes this quote to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Life Together*. New York: Harper & Row, 1954, 29)

and its success. Nothing is more important than saving souls. Satan is the one who succeeds as I foolishly fragment the delicate Lutheran balance of truth and love, spiritual and physical, product (what) and process (how). Walther would rip his robe at me, too. No, he'd point me to the cross. There I find the earth-splitting, heaven-rending tension of law and gospel ripping out the heart of God where it bleeds for sinners with life and death, anger and love, threat and promise, human and divine, heaven and hell. Perhaps he'd point me also to the upper room where my Savior washes clean the soles and souls of those whom he calls, "Do as I have done for you...You will be blessed." Forgiven, I leave remembering balance. Two things.

Lutheran *Seelsorge* cares about the integrity of the means of grace *and* cares about the whole well-being of the people whom the gospel catches in its net. A fisherman treats the trophies of his catch gently and respectfully, understanding what might harm them in the process of being hauled in. He also takes care of his fishing gear, the tools of his livelihood, without which he'd never catch fish. Sometimes these twin interests collide and things get messy. Nets get snagged deep in the water and must be cut loose and lost. Or lures get snapped deep in a fish's jaws and, cutting the fish to save the lure, the fisherman loses the fish. Likewise, fishing for men can be messy. We ought to expect it. And do well to prepare for it. People are people, not just fluffy souls. Again, the goal is balance, always keeping in mind that means of grace ministry is the church's calling, and love is the church's calling, neither without the other. Faithful means of grace ministry is loving, and love for others finds its life and meaning in the means of grace.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, Lutheran theologians have traditionally applied *Seelsorge* to the pastoral office alone, and rightly so.<sup>46</sup> This was the term's original intent, and it continues to this day. However, "Christian soul care is much too important to be restricted to the clergy or any other single group of people...Ultimately, all Christians are called to the task of caring for the souls of others."<sup>47</sup> Christ's "Take care of my sheep," (John 21:16) was spoken to Peter as the first call of an echo for disciples of all times, just as he commissioned the Eleven and all believers, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15). Anyone who follows Christ is "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:13,14) to season others' lives with God-flavors and shine into others' lives with God-colors, caring for souls. Called workers like pastors, teachers, and staff ministers have the joyful responsibility to care for souls on behalf of their calling body, while all Christians (including called workers in our personal priesthood) care for souls in response to the calling of the Scriptures.<sup>48</sup> Here, too, a balance is important. Clergy do not hold a monopoly on caring for souls,<sup>49</sup> and the laity ought not entrust caring for souls exclusively to their called workers. At the same time, the church will agree on the wisdom of assigning particular tasks to either party for the good of the kingdom.

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<sup>45</sup> "In spiritual care, God wants to act. In the midst of all anxiety and sorrow we are to trust God. God alone can be a help and a comfort. The goal of spiritual care should never be a change of mental condition...I do not provide *decisive* help for anyone if I turn a sad person into a cheerful one, a timid person into a courageous one...Christ and his victory over health and sickness, luck and misfortune, birth and death must be proclaimed. The help he brings is forgiveness and new life out of death" (Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, and Rochelle, Jay C. tr. *Spiritual Care*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, 30)

<sup>46</sup> "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers" (1 Peter 5:2).

<sup>47</sup> (Benner 1998, 32-34)

<sup>48</sup> For my definition of terms, I reserve *Seelsorge* and "pastoral care" for the pastoral ministry, while "care of souls" and "spiritual care" can apply to both the public ministry (pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and other called positions) and wider Christendom.

<sup>49</sup> My pastoral theology textbook introduced me to *Seelsorge* as follows: "The pastor has responsibility to minister not only to the congregation as such, but also to each individual member of his flock...concerned not only about the well-being of his flock as such, but also about that of each individual sheep in his flock according to its needs." Then the authors continue, "It is not essentially different from what every Christian ought to do." (A. W. Schuetze and I. J. Habeck, 1974, 139)

Multitudinous writings do and should exist on the topic of the call and ministry and more will be needed, but such lies beyond the scope of this essay. A similar volume of writings offers scriptural guidance and encouragement for means of grace ministry (at this convention one such offering is being presented on the sacraments), which is the heart and core of caring for souls. Fewer writings, at least in confessional Lutheran circles, offer scriptural guidance and encouragement for the relational aspect of caring for souls with means of grace ministry. So let's devote the remainder of our attention to this focus: relational ministry. But not without some concern, that is, we must be sure that we keep one foot planted firmly in the means of grace entrusted to us, without stepping away from the tools given to the Church. Only then can the other foot find a landing spot, stepping forward into our calling to care for souls, which is caring for people.<sup>50</sup>

We commit to the instructions and exhortations of the Scriptures and do not detach the soul from the person, nor Christ's love from the Church's love—with fear and trepidation. But also with faith and prayer, that our love may “abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight” so that we may “be able to discern what is best...filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:10,11).

## People matter to God and to the Church

The June 2011 edition of the *WELS Connection* celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Central Africa Medical Mission. “It's obvious God has blessed our synod's mission efforts through the Lutheran Church of Central Africa. Since WELS missionaries first arrived in Zambia and Malawi half a century ago, membership in our sister synod which operates in the two countries has grown to more than 55,000. The Holy Spirit gets all the credit for the growth. The medical mission helped open doors for the gospel by caring for the sick or injured.” Care for the body opened the door to the soul.<sup>51,52</sup> People matter. Kathie Wendland, one of the early nurses at the medical mission, explains, “They come to you at a time when they're going to listen like they've never listened before. Many are facing death. And that's really a wonderful opportunity then to be talking to them about an eternal life that is waiting for them through Christ...What I was doing there was creating this reputation of someone who loved people, somebody who would take care of people when nobody else would or could, and because of that, now they would listen when someone would tell them about Jesus Christ.”<sup>53</sup> Now they would listen. Like the parents and their little lambs who learn of Jesus because of your early childhood education program or vacation Bible school. Like the hungry

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<sup>50</sup> “Every prominent curate in antiquity—from Basil and the Cappadocians through St. John Chrysostom and all the way to Gregory the Great—every single one of them entered into their work as physicians of the soul only with great fear and trepidation. They were keenly aware of the eternal ramifications of the work of pastoral care. I would, therefore, stress that any contemporary efforts to recover soul care in our time be done with great caution; we need to go slowly and learn from one another and from those faithful *Seelers* who have gone ahead to glory” (Senkbeil, Harold L. “The Art of Spiritual Evaluation: A Framework for Understanding the Health of the Soul and Its Cure.” *Christ's Gifts for Healing the Soul: Toward a Lutheran Identity in the New Millenium*, 2001, 55).

<sup>51</sup> The apostle Paul liked to refer to similar open doors for the gospel: “a great door for effective work has opened to me” (1 Corinthians 16:9); “Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me” (2 Corinthians 2:12); “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message” (Colossians 4:3).

<sup>52</sup> “[Pastor Cox] remembers that we learned the importance of offering humanitarian aid here partly by accident. Our missionaries were told by the president of Malawi they couldn't expand their work into his country from Zambia—unless they also provided medical care. ‘I thank God that he put President Banda in our way so to speak when we thought he was getting in our way and maybe setting up a barrier, but it became that door to the gospel that he really set up for us.’ And so the Central African Medical Mission stepped in to provide the required care.”

<sup>53</sup> (Quotes retrieved from *WELS Connection*, June 2011)

and homeless souls with physical hunger, both of which you feed as they now listen. People matter. Why? Because they matter first and foremost to God.

God himself is relational. The doctrine of the Trinity, as we believe it from Scripture and express it in the Athanasian Creed, affirms that “we worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God.” Real and living persons—“distinct,” yet relational—the persons of the triune God interact with each other. The Son is “begotten of the Father” and the Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son,” all of whom are “coequal and coeternal...one God worshipped as three persons.” This God instituted marriage, designed friendships, and fashioned the Church as the body of Christ for humans, whom he wired to be relational like him. More than that. With him!

The incredibly good news is that Emmanuel wants to relate to people who have broken his design, showing ourselves, by our shameful sins, to be incapable of connecting to him and each other in a way that fulfills his holy purpose.

When the Apostles’ Creed confesses trust in the one who was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried, it expresses a penetrating affirmation of God’s determination to share fully in our human condition. This stands against the docetic<sup>54</sup> view that Christ was never really born.<sup>55</sup>

On the night before he died Jesus spoke some of his most powerful words, connecting—interlocking—the dots between God’s miraculously mysterious intra-relationship within the Trinity and his miraculously merciful inter-relationship with sinful people lost without his love. He “lets us in,” so to speak. Saving us. Setting us apart.<sup>56</sup>

People matter to God. The first chapter of the Old Testament concludes with the crown of God’s creation: people. And the first words of the New Testament in Matthew 1:1 mention two topics without which the Scriptures would be meaningless: Jesus Christ and people, specifically the beginning of the Son of God’s genealogy as “the son of David.” As if asterisked to be footnoted with (*sic*), four particular names stand out as peculiar: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and “Uriah’s wife” Bathsheba. Not only was it culturally inappropriate and confusing to include women in genealogies, but...*these* women?! I guess anyone can get into the family. Exactly.

People matter to Jesus. During some of the most intense moments of his redemptive work saving souls globally, Jesus reached out to souls locally, caring for them as people. At his baptism Jesus could have asked Gabriel to baptize him like new parents eagerly asking a special guest pastor to perform a baptism, but instead he ministered to John as much as, or more than, John ministered

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<sup>54</sup> DJL footnote—Docetism is a false teaching related to Gnosticism, proposing that Christ did not really have a physical body, just an apparent one, and therefore only apparently suffered and died, but not really. Dangerously man made separation of the spiritual and physical.

<sup>55</sup> (Oden, Thomas C. *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, 19)

<sup>56</sup> From the gospel of John:

- “I am in the Father and the Father is in me...I am going to the Father” (14:11,12).
- “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever” (14:16).
- “I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (14:20).
- “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (14:23).
- “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener...I am the vine; you are the branches” (15:1,5).
- “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (15:15).

to him.<sup>57</sup> Jesus' transfiguration lifted the eyes and strengthened the resolve of three "eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16; Luke 9:28) whom he later took along with him into the inner garden when, with suffering soul, he dared to ask the Father for another way, if possible (Mark 14:33-36). Jesus had healed many people, spiritually and physically, in quiet corners and busy streets, yet in the heated moment of being arrested, he applied heaven's miraculous help to an enemy, healing the guillotined ear of Malchus, a servant of the high priest (Luke 22:51). Stumbling forward under the crushing weight of the cursed cross, Jesus refused to spit poisonous venom on his attackers (1 Peter 2:23), instead warning the weeping women. Then with his crushing weight of the world's sin on the cross, Jesus prayed for his enemies, pardoned a condemned criminal, and provided for the well-being of his mother (Luke 23:26-43; John 19:25-27). Risen from the dead, Jesus returned a second time to the disciples huddled in the locked house, to patiently calm the doubts of Thomas with spiritual promise and physical sight and touch (John 20:24-29). His "convincing proofs that he was alive" (Acts 1:3), compassionate concessions to the weak human flesh of his disciples, continued for 40 days until Jesus ascended not under the cover of darkness but in the midday company of his disciples as "he was taken up before their very eyes" (Acts 1:9). These works of caring for people make our Savior's active obedience as lovingly "other-focused" as his passive obedience, both of which graciously fulfill with "the full extent of his love" (John 13:1) our calling, "Do as I have done for you." Before we even try. With feet and hearts already clean, we now extend our love—further than ever before.<sup>58</sup>

Fittingly, this God in relationship within the Trinity and in relationship with people cares about community and relationship among people. People matter. "Take care of my sheep." Sheep caring for sheep is who we are and what we are called to do. The Scriptures say that makes us shepherds who, like Moses and David, and even Jesus, speak the language of both sheep and shepherd. Paul explores and encourages our dual identity of *receptacle* of the gospel and *resource* for the gospel with two metaphors: "jars of clay" and "body of Christ."<sup>59</sup>

People. Jars of clay. Cracked pots.<sup>60</sup> Common, ordinary Christians. Sometimes wayward sheep. Helping other cracked pots and wayward sheep. Even lost sheep. This is relational ministry as assigned by our relational God, who never removes himself from the relationship just as the head never decides to refuse its body as junk or even recycle it for another. Neither does God remove the

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<sup>57</sup> "Then John gave this testimony: 'I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit." I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God'" (John 1:32-34).

<sup>58</sup> "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you...This is my command: Love each other" (John 15:12,17). Sandwiched between these commands from Jesus *to us* about the ultimate fulfillment of his law is the ultimate fulfillment of his gospel *for us* and *in us*: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends...You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (15:13,14,16).

<sup>59</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:7, "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." Paul's words emphasize the humanity—the "earthen" dimensions—of congregations. Also, it is clear that congregations often do obscure rather than reveal God by their behavior; yet Paul's words suggest that it is through these human qualities—a congregation's life together and its witness in the world—that God's extraordinary power is visible and experienced. In their very humanity, congregations are revelatory agents—for good or for ill...In addition to the clay jar metaphor in his correspondence with the church at Corinth, Paul also referred to the Corinthian congregation as the "body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27). This is an equally extraordinary claim: that in the common life and witness of these quite ordinary and often wayward Christians at Corinth, Christ was present. They were not simply Christ's emissaries or representatives, but his very body, charged with continuing his ministry... (Carroll, Jackson W. *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006, 2,11)

<sup>60</sup> Thanks to Pastor Jim Radloff for teaching me this term early in my ministry, though I'm not sure if he wanted me to learn it more as a description of others or myself. I have a hunch that I'm a better pastor and person when I realize it is both.

responsibility he places on us and in us to care for people, which in light of his caring for us divinely becomes less of a busy burden and more of an affectionate *agape* love. Just recall some of the terms of endearment spilling out of the hearts of the inspired authors of Scripture to the people they care about—friends, brothers, saints, my dear children, companion, beloved, fellow servant, and more.

One of the most delightful expressions of people caring for people in the Bible is Paul's writing to his beloved Thessalonians. "We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:7,8).

- "We loved you so much," an intensity of affection and attraction, the Greek word was once discovered on the grave stone of a child as an inscription of the parents' deep yearning<sup>61</sup>
- "To share," is the giving of something with which one retains a part and the other receives a part so that they relate<sup>62</sup>
- "Our own lives," literally, "our own souls,"<sup>63</sup> soul sharing is part of gospel sharing in relational ministry

"We dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God...When we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you...May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you" (2:11,12,17; 3:12). This is far from transactional, procedure-driven, busy-busy ministry that puts organizational agenda first. This is a love-based caring for souls. Does my church look like this? Does my synod look like this? Do I? In some ways with some people, yes. In other ways with other people, not so much. Sometimes I am just way too important in my own eyes.

At the end of the day in my church and synod, the invisible church marches on and ministers in the sphere of and in step with—not separate from—the visible church. Two things. Therefore, people matter. John the Baptist knew that, so he dressed and ate and preached and baptized appropriately for his context in his style with his gifts, always pointing to the Lamb of God. Always preparing the way. "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him" (Mark 1:5). And through him they found the Messiah.

### **REFLECT AND RESOLVE**

"Now about brotherly love ... do so more and more" (1 Thessalonians 4:9,10). Refer to Appendix B on p. 33 of this essay. After reflecting on its encouragement write your keyword(s) here:

## **Relational means of grace ministry**

The *Pulpit & Pew* project "asked pastors about a number of daily problems that they face; the one that they reported as their greatest challenge was reaching people with the gospel in today's world. Seventy-four percent overall said that this was a problem they faced on a day-to-day basis."<sup>64,65</sup> This statistic supportively suggests the relevance of an essay at a synod convention about relational means of grace ministry.

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<sup>61</sup> ομειρομαι

<sup>62</sup> μεταδιδωμι

<sup>63</sup> ψυχη

<sup>64</sup> (Carroll 2006, 32)

Want to relate to the child in your classroom with ADD? Start where you are and with what you have, especially the love of Jesus that scrubs between toes. See yourself as the child's servant rather than master. Continue with some research of your own, and partner your care for souls with an ADD professional. You don't have to be the expert. Get more information from the student and his or her parents than from the Internet. Live the gospel. Share the gospel. Two things.

Not sure how to get your leadership on board with member ministry that takes ownership of the church's mission and doesn't rely on the pastor do to everything? Start where you are and with what you have, especially the love of Jesus that gets up from the tasty meal and takes up the towel. Show servant leadership by believing in Christ and in his love that empowers and equips believers.<sup>66</sup> Trust these partners in the gospel<sup>67</sup> to do ministry fitting the church's mission with *their* gifts and *their* ideas *their* way<sup>68</sup>—yes, get out of the way; go golfing, volunteer at the police department, find some friends who aren't pastors or members or WELS, take a reading retreat or a sorely needed vacation, and stop smothering the universal priesthood with well-meaning micromanagement. Give people (and fellow called workers at your congregation and around our synod) the permission to try, and the courageous grace to fail forward.<sup>69</sup> Continue with some research of your own. Study the Scriptures. Grow together with your leaders and admit you don't have all the answers and will accept some of theirs.<sup>70</sup> Live the gospel. Share the gospel. Two truths. That's relational means of grace ministry.

When it came to relating to people and caring for their souls, Jesus was anything but controlling or transactional. Jesus was the model soul shepherd in his dealings with people. He met them where they were, invited choice, asked probing questions, was scandalously inclusive, dealt with each person uniquely and individually, spoke in ordinary language, demonstrated a holistic respect for the close relationship of body and soul, invited engagement not passive receptivity, and gave himself not just advice.<sup>71</sup> Jesus was, and still is, our relational Savior, in tune with the present

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<sup>65</sup> (Carroll 2006) *Pulpit & Pew* is a major research project whose purpose is to describe as comprehensively as possible the state of Protestant and Catholic pastoral leadership in the U.S. What are the trends, and what issues do clergy face? The project also aims to contribute to an understanding of excellent pastoral leadership and how it can be called forth and supported. Undertaken by Duke University Divinity School, the project is supported by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. For further information, see [www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu](http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu). (Editor's note)

Ten research reports and seven books relate what has been learned. The 10 reports, plus a number of articles on various topics, are available at no cost from the *Pulpit & Pew* website ([www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu](http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu)) or from *Pulpit & Pew*. Duke University Divinity School, Box 90983, Durham, NC 27708. Two previous books focused on Catholic priests (Hoge 2002 and Hoge and Wenger 2003) and were published by Liturgical Press in cooperation with the National Federation of Priests' Councils. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company is publishing the remaining five books as a *Pulpit & Pew* series. In addition to this book, they include a study of clergy who have left the pastoral ministry either to take another type of church-related position or to leave ministry altogether (Hoge and Wenger 2005); a study reporting in-depth interviews with six pastors about how they and their congregations seek to engage in public ministry in their local communities (Constantine 2005); a theological reflection on the meaning of excellence in ministry (Jones and Armstrong 2006); (Preface footnote ix) and a history of pastoral leadership in America (E. Brooks Holifield, 2007).

<sup>66</sup> Philippians 1:6, "...being confident of that, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion..."

<sup>67</sup> Philippians 1:4,5, "...I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel..."

<sup>68</sup> Philippians 1:10, "...so that you may be able to discern what is best..."

<sup>69</sup> Philippians 1:14, "Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly."

<sup>70</sup> Philippians 1:25, "...I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith."

<sup>71</sup> (Benner 1998, 27,28; a partial listing here. See the complete list in Appendix C, p. 35 of this essay. A few of these could use better explanation if not scriptural support)

situation and faith and Scripture. The Pharisees, in their technical world that banked on institutional and transactional attempts to get right with God, hated that.<sup>72</sup>

Thomas C. Oden, in *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition*, “chooses to illustrate his point by discussing the most influential single author on pastoral care in the history of the church—Gregory the Great, who was Bishop of Rome from A.D. 540-604. Gregory’s *Book of Pastoral Rule* is the single most widely read book, outside the Bible itself, ever written on the subject of pastoral care.” While we might debate the “most influential single author” compliment for Gregory, Oden does us a favor by connecting Gregory’s pastoral care to Augustine, “a brilliant pastor at work showing...a wise contextual pastoral care.”<sup>73</sup> He continues by describing what contextual meant for Gregory.

Each pastoral case requires variable response...Gregory’s most influential assumption is that no two pastoral cases are to be handled in precisely the same way. Each requires a response gauged to the specific contours of the situation. Gregory calls the pastor to be keenly attentive to these contextual peculiarities, fine nuances, and ever-changing emotive qualities rather than flatly applying rigid norms without listening to the situation.<sup>74</sup>

That sounds like a lot of work, and it is. Messy work, like trying to fumble through cultivating a friendship with a homeless man. Or one of my pastor friends who, instead of sending a form letter (or even a letter for that matter) brought the means of grace to an inactive member by personally visiting his farm, accompanying him to the barn, and learning how to milk cows. Now he’s baling hay, too, and through this relational ministry his visits live the gospel, share the gospel, and care for souls. “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep!” (Luke 15:6).

The messiness of black Florsheim wingtips that now need polishing for Sunday is kibbles and bits compared to the inner turmoil when it comes to relational ministry. One of my favorite church cartoons speaks volumes in only two pictured frames. In the first, a pastor studiously sits in front of a pile of books with pen in hand, and the cloud of his thought says, “I should be making visits.” In the second frame, the same pastor is sitting next to a homebound woman on her floral print sofa with Bible in hand and cat nestled at his feet, thinking, “I should be working on my sermon.” Satan, I decry thee! Leave me alone! Let ministry be straightforward and easy. Then again, who says this comes from Satan? The Pharisees saw the mess Jesus was making of their institutionalized religion and thought he came from Satan.<sup>75</sup> Not true. The God of salvation explained to skeptical Ananias how he’d work through the mess of drafting the murderous Saul: “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:15,16). Paul’s thorn, his chains, and his shameful past all made his ministry a mess—as catalysts for the kingdom that captured him and for which he fought to the end.

Embrace the mess, brother. Christ is in it with you. Don’t be afraid of the burning bush that makes you wonder if you should be a shepherd or a rancher. Don’t be afraid of the other side of the boat when the fish aren’t biting on your side. Don’t be afraid of reductions in numbers that make you make difficult decisions you don’t want to make. Don’t be afraid of how to divide your attention

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<sup>72</sup> “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water?” (Luke 13:15). “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath...Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus” (Mark 2:27,28,3:6).

<sup>73</sup> (Oden 1984, 8,14. The author seeks “to avoid three stumbling blocks: 1) an antihistorical view of pastoral theology; 2) an antipastoral approach to historical theology; and 3) an antitheological style of pastoral care.” 13)

<sup>74</sup> (Oden 1984, 55)

<sup>75</sup> “It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons” (Matthew 9:34).

between the faithful 99 and the one who is lost. Don't be afraid of asking questions. Don't be afraid of unknown answers. Don't be afraid of the wind and the waves, sent by heaven's breath—your Savior is there. "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid...Come" (Matthew 14:27,29). These are not easily resolved conflicts for embodied souls, for saints with both flesh...and freedom.

"Somebody once asked Gregory of Nazianzus a question. He replied, 'I would rather answer that one in the pulpit.'"<sup>76</sup> The chancel is so safe. The pulpit is so objective, and it should be no other way, at least in that place. With the post-service walk to the narthex, however, the objective collides with the subjective, and we pastors encounter real people. Teachers spend the day in the classroom proceeding through planned lessons and a schedule structured by bells and procedures. Then after school it gets more interesting. Then they see Brock behind school kissing Emily, and an angry mom needs to vent, and coworkers need to be managed differently. We have honed our skills for means of grace ministry that focuses on pastoral rites, such as found in the liturgy of our worship that we perform from the chancel, and on corporate organization such as found in a teacher's classroom. We have also honed our skills for means of grace ministry in visitation and counseling, outside of the pulpit and classroom. Somewhere between public rites and private meetings, such as in the narthex and the hallway, the parking lot and the faculty lounge, the church community and our own neighborhood, we find everyday opportunities for means of grace ministry, not as connected to rites as to relationships. As we now explore both environments, they will shed light on relational ministry practices that care for souls.

## Relational ministry practices<sup>77</sup>

God willing, by the time of our 61st biennial synod convention, the WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts will have successfully served at least another 1,000 participants. "Since 1996, conferences have been held every three years and interest has grown with more than 1,000 people benefitting from each event. Interest in good worship innovation continues in WELS as does the need for both solid theological and creative perspectives."<sup>78</sup> Theology blends with creativity in our worship education, developing our worship leaders, musicians, vocalists, and artists to better serve embodied souls with the means of grace. But alas, music itself is not the means of grace; neither are felt banners or paraments, for that matter. Yet they serve and support the means of grace, so we do well to pay attention to them, to study them, and to educate ourselves in their theological and creative use.

Relational ministry and its practice is not, in itself, the means of grace. When we value people and treat them with interest, it doesn't save their souls any more than a three-year-old pounding on the piano saves souls. We would not speak of Dale Carnegie as a *Seelsorger*. Neither should we be satisfied neglecting the impact of relational ministry as serving and supporting the gospel,<sup>79</sup> just like music. Called workers who develop their people skills through early training and lifelong learning are better equipped to care for souls, even as they are better equipped to care for

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<sup>76</sup> Donald G. Miller. *Fire in Thy Mouth*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954, 83. Quoted by Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980, 83).

<sup>77</sup> These relational ministry practices will be much further expanded for practical application in this essay's accompanying Bible study to be posted on Connect, WELS' Intranet for called workers and congregational leaders, by the end of August (<http://www.wels.net/connect-resources>).

<sup>78</sup> <http://www.wels.net/news-events/events/national-worship-conference>

<sup>79</sup> Kenneth Haugk, founder of Stephen Ministries, believes that "education offered in churches and other religious institutions does not always satisfy the need for knowledge that will serve you well in caring for others" (Kenneth C. Haugk and William J. McKay. *Christian Caregiving: A Way of Life Leader's Guide*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986, 14).

souls because they have learned how to present a religion lesson or preach a text. Church members who, with theology and creativity, evaluate the systems of their congregation with a concern that people matter, are better equipped to care for souls. We need education in God's gifts of relating to people as much as we need education in God's gifts of directing a choir or decorating a chancel.

As Lutherans, we thank God for clear teaching on the inherent power of the means. We know all growth in faith and power for sanctified living comes only by the power of the Spirit in the gospel. Our knowledge, skill, and abilities cannot in themselves convert an unbeliever or strengthen a single child of God.

But right there we must be careful that we don't draw an unbiblical conclusion that would actually make us quite imbalanced in our theology and approach to ministry. I will use an analogy from the Apostles' Creed. We want a full three article approach to ministry...We use First Article gifts, to proclaim Second Article truths, with Third Article confidence. The gospel and the means of grace, the Second and Third Articles, stand in magisterial position within the church. The gifts of the First Article stand in a ministerial position to the gospel and the means...

There is room in the ministry for many and varied sets of First Article gifts.<sup>80</sup>

Relational ministry employs First, Second, and Third Article gifts to care for embodied souls. Below are some practices in areas where we might consider developing skills in First Article gifts that care for souls by relational means of grace ministry. The list is not exhaustive by any means, but simply makes a start at identifying areas of opportunity for attention.

## **Mutuality**

A relationship can be a professional one, such as a teacher and student or doctor and patient and, when so, the reciprocity of knowing, learning, and growing is disproportionate. "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master" (Matthew 10:24). This professionalism has its place in the secular world as well as the church. The principal dude is not the students' big buddy. Then again, the president of Martin Luther College gets two days of exercise each year carrying boxes of shoes, clothes, maybe some books, and making acquaintances, maybe some friends. I have worked side by side with two veteran pastors who have taught me the importance of being real and having fun with members of the congregation both at and away from church, and I have caught what I was taught: When people have "learned to know [their pastor] as a friend who takes personal interest in them, it will be much easier for them to accept his ministrations in a time of trial, or to go to him for help when a problem arises in their personal life...[and] will serve to build up the member's confidence and make him more ready to speak of what is in his heart."<sup>81</sup> The mutuality of a personal relationship brings dividends of blessings for both parties.<sup>82</sup> "You are those who have stood by me in my trials," (Luke 22:28) the Son of God thanked his disciples for their companionship and care.

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<sup>80</sup> (Gurgel, Richard. "Fan into Flame (Your Faith and) the Gift of God! A Call to Grow for Brothers and Sisters in the Public Ministry." 2009, 12,13)

<sup>81</sup> (A. W. Schuetze and I. J. Habeck, 1974, 141,144)

<sup>82</sup> Sometimes the one considered the professional or the expert is the one who benefits, grows, and learns even more. I wonder if a day goes by when a kindergarten teacher doesn't learn something from the little lambs under her care. Ronnie, my homeless friend, brings joy, appreciation, and growth to my life and ministry, opening my world to explorations otherwise unknown. By mutuality in relational ministry we find ourselves cared for.

No, by their vocation or their call into the public ministry, parents and children do not stand on equal footing, neither do teachers and students or clergy and laity. Yet the Bible’s metaphor for a pastor is not *king* but *shepherd*, whose influence is rarely coercive. “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy,” the apostle assured the Christians in Corinth (2 Corinthians 1:23), employing mutuality in caring for souls.

Pastors must live in the spacious country of the covenant and be on familiar terms with all the people and their dialects, know every nook and cranny in the landscape—not merely be informed *about* them as a tour guide might but at ease among them as one who has grown up there, playing in the mountains and working in the fields, falling in and out of love, getting hurt and getting well. It is no easy thing, venturing out of our cozy small-minded religious programs into a large-souled obedience, leaving the secure successes of our professionally designed lives...<sup>83</sup>

## GROW

Think of people or groups in your care, who in turn can care for you. List two of them whose relationship you could develop more closely in months ahead, for mutual blessings.

- 1)
- 2)

The mutuality of relational ministry had its place even among church fathers like Augustine, who once told his congregation in Hippo, “For you I am a bishop; with you I am a Christian.”<sup>84</sup> Caring for souls is not something we always do *to* people, often it is something we do *with* them.

Nathan’s approach to the scandalous King David demonstrated mutuality. “I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’—and you forgave the guilt of my sin” (Psalm 32:5). How the kingdom of God benefits when open dialogue<sup>85</sup> at church

council, school board, faculty, and a host of other meetings becomes expected as the culture of the organization, led by the pastor or principal. “What you have to say is important. You are a valuable contributor.” And that means listening.<sup>86</sup>

## Listening

My 19-year-old son and I met a salesperson and when we were walking away, I asked him, “Do you remember her name?”

“Yeah...no...I think it’s Kim.”

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<sup>83</sup> (Peterson, Eugene H. *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987, 57)

<sup>84</sup> (Smither, Edward L. *Augustine as Mentor*. Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2008, 222)

<sup>85</sup> My father has Parkinson’s disease and lives in a nursing home. I have watched him respond so much more positively to health care professionals who come near, come close, and come down where he is sitting (especially because he is hard of hearing). Doctors and nurses giving him even a small dose of mutuality make all the difference. During that moment he can better hear them and be sure that he is being heard. So the exchange between the two parties multiplies its dimensions of understanding. The dialogue that takes place in these circumstances differs greatly from the short answers and succinct questions otherwise. Genuine, expressive dialogue “is more than advice giving, information exchange, or the communication of something already known. Properly understood, dialogue is exploration and discovery through conversational engagement. It is shared inquiry that is designed to increase awareness, understanding, and insight.” (Benner 1998, 131)

<sup>86</sup> “True physicians of the soul, therefore, must pray for God’s gift of discernment...St. John Chrysostom warns every would-be shepherd against haste or dictatorial methods in dealing with God’s sheep...he calls for tact and patience among pastors...“The shepherd needs great wisdom and a thousand eyes, to examine the soul’s condition from every angle’ ... The pastor must first listen to the soul before he can minister to the soul. Since the condition of the soul is disclosed primarily by the heart, effective physicians of the soul must polish their listening skills; they must learn to listen not merely with their ears but with their hearts. Faithful pastoral care of the soul starts when one heart discloses itself to another heart—then the healing ministrations of God’s Word and Sacraments may be most effectively applied” (Senkbeil, 54).

“Hmm...I think it’s...well, it starts with an ‘m.’” It was Melissa, but that really didn’t cut it if I’d greeted her, “Hi Mmmm.” My son and I agreed we needed to work on remembering the names of

**DEMONSTRATE** your listening skills! Greet your neighbor, the one you met when we first started, 1) using your neighbor’s name, and 2) by echoing to your neighbor the one interesting fact that you learned about that person.

people we meet.<sup>87</sup> It’s kind, courteous, and expresses interest. Mom always told me we should listen twice as much as we speak because God gave us two ears and one mouth. One local bank boasts on a billboard, “Ironically our tellers are great listeners.” James urges us to be “quick to listen, slow to speak” (James 1:19). Listening not only allows us to better understand and evaluate, but it also offers significance to the one who is speaking.<sup>88</sup> That person matters. “Tell me more about \_\_\_\_.” “How’s it going with \_\_\_\_?” Then

whatever we hear can make a difference in approaching that person with care relevant to his or her needs more than our assumptions. “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29). Harold Senkbeil refers to this type of listening as “spiritual evaluation,” supporting a means of grace ministry.

Medical charts are indispensable for physicians of the body. Physicians of the soul are interested in the history of the soul’s care as well...to discover what spiritual ailments are chronic in this soul, what pressing temptations of the devil, world, or flesh are impinging on the soul’s health, and what God has been doing about it...Spiritual evaluation is best understood as a two-stage process. First, the pastor seeks to understand the presenting symptoms in view of the overall health of the soul. However, the pastor who knows that the sole remedy for sin is the forgiveness of sins will see this stage as merely preliminary. The heart and center of the care of the soul is the absolution of the sinner in the name of Jesus Christ.<sup>89</sup>

“The nineteenth-century French clinician Laennec used to say to his students: ‘Listen, listen to your patient! He is giving you the diagnosis.’ Laennec was a good physician. He invented the stethoscope.”<sup>90</sup> One wonders what trouble could have been spared if Job’s friends or young Joseph’s brothers would have done a little more listening. It isn’t easy, as this admonition suggests:

Few learnings are more important to the pastor than to learn when to keep silent and when to speak. Two equal dangers must be avoided: either speaking what should be left unspoken or failing to speak what must be spoken. The pastor must at times be like a bell—an open,

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<sup>87</sup> Later, at a wedding rehearsal, I met with a delightful Indian couple and their family and friends, a roomful of brown-skinned, black-haired strangers, and related the experience—complete with names—to my wife. Thangaraja. Aditya. Shanmugasundaram. Now, why could I remember multiple Indian names so strange to my American tongue but not “Melissa”? Because I knew I needed to pay attention and work hard in order to pronounce their names correctly. With Melissa, I was thinking ahead about how I’d counter her high price and company lines. I wasn’t paying attention and treating her as a person, just a position that was getting in my way.

<sup>88</sup> Listening can often become our term for what we’re really doing and that’s rehearsing in our mind what we’re going to say next while the other person’s mouth is moving and sounds are dropping to the floor. Just like asking questions—leading questions—can often become our term for exerting our opinion in a way sneaky enough that the other person might eagerly agree. In a conversation with a caring WELS man concerned about his friend attending a heterodox church, the man told me that his friend was turned off by religious authorities preaching at him about his poor life choices. I suggested that before he also preached to his friend, he should ask him some questions and listen for awhile. His response was, “We *are* asking him questions and listening, like the other day I asked him, ‘Don’t you know that they don’t believe in infant baptism?’” That’s a leading question. “He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame” (Proverbs 18:13).

<sup>89</sup> (Senkbeil 2001, 61)

<sup>90</sup> (Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. 1980, 89)

clear, ringing public witness. But bells are irritating if rung incessantly. Bells are best heard sparingly and at the uniquely fitting time, especially at special, celebrative times.<sup>91</sup>

In counseling and classroom discipline before we offer forgiveness or sage advice too prematurely for what is good for the soul, we need only listen...and then maybe listen some more. “Okay, what did you do then?” “Why is that important to you?” Participants made a discovery in our recent friendship witnessing session—they can become more confident in their witnessing if they do a little work first on their listening skills and remind themselves that they don’t always need to win the argument right off the bat. Or even argue. Questions are powerful. “The particular skill which needs to be developed is to diagnose just what Word of God the individual in a particular situation needs and to be able to apply it in a manner which he will understand.”<sup>92</sup> And mystery of mysteries, the omniscient Son of God spent time in his Father’s house as a 12-year-old among the temple teachers “listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46).<sup>93</sup> Finally, the Bible promises that God even listens to us.<sup>94</sup> Is there a person or situation you are now struggling to understand? Get to know and appreciate the people for whom you care. Listen to them, “allowing the soul to unburden itself in the presence of someone whose care surpasses mere human compassion...Such spiritual listening therefore transcends empathy; the goal is to evaluate the health of the soul and to provide such nutrients and cures as its maladies may suggest.”<sup>95</sup> Then speak what he or she or they need to hear, remembering what believers need to hear—yes, like to hear—most of all. Their Savior’s voice.<sup>96</sup>

### LEARN

Identify a person or situation you are now struggling to understand, and can commit to new and improved listening:

## Spiritual conversations

We might be surprised that C.F.W. Walther, our champion of distinguishing between law and gospel in means of grace ministry, especially in preaching, advises pastors, “Don’t preach.” He understood that preaching is not the essence of ministry but a form of it. The essence of ministry is the gospel, which is the means of grace in Word and sacraments. The twin doctrines of law and gospel deserve publication far beyond the pulpit. Therefore, in his textbook of pastoral theology when instructing seminary students about visiting the sick, Walther said of the pastor, “Give the patient the necessary spiritual nourishment in a conversational, not a sermonic, way: especially that he not preach much to the severely ill, and, if they are in great pain, that he impress on them only passages of holy Scripture with short applications and suitable hymn verses, pausing from time to time, and praying with short, heartfelt sighs.”<sup>97</sup> Pastors love hospital visits because we stand before a captive audience, but Walther says save the sermon for the pulpit. There is opportunity here for dialogue, for a two-way spiritual conversation in a garden where God is working, pruning, cleaning, loving. How many of these moments of pastor-with-people-in-crisis present themselves for relational ministry? Hired hands might sigh, “Too many!” Shepherds would muse, “Not enough.”

<sup>91</sup> (Oden 1984, 66)

<sup>92</sup> (A. W. Schuetze and I. J. Habeck 1974, 140)

<sup>93</sup> On another note of role reversal, the July/August 2011 edition of *Preach the Word* newsletter (Vol. 14, No. 6) published by the WELS Commission on Worship and edited by Prof. Rich Gurgel focuses on preachers listening to their hearers (<http://preaching.wlsce.net/>)!

<sup>94</sup> “The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles” (Psalm 34:17).

<sup>95</sup> (Senkbeil 2001, 58)

<sup>96</sup> “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27).

<sup>97</sup> (Walther, C.F.W. *American Lutheran Pastoral Theology*. Drickamer, John, ed. New Haven, MO: Lutheran News, Inc., 1995, 207)

David Benner agrees with the “not enough,” and describes these occasional ministry moments as “episodic pastoral care.” Perhaps a bit too critically he worries about members of the visible church who receive pastoral care only at church or when sick or dying, “Is it any wonder that they feel the church has little relevance to the inner life of their soul?”<sup>98</sup> With advances in medical care, sick members sometimes sneak in and out of the hospital before pastors know it or can respond, or they find home treatment just as effective. This presents fewer opportunities for pastoral visitation.<sup>99</sup>

Rather than congregations asking the Lord of the church to strike a few members each week with some kind of plague or other malady—not serious enough to be fatal but serious enough to hospitalize them long enough for a caring visit where the pastor can enjoy an extended, personal conversation with them—a better option might be to engage similar spiritual conversations in other moments. An e-mail, “Pastor, we had our baby.” A phone call, “Miss Schultz, Tyler’s having some issues at home and won’t be at school until lunch today.” The small talk with parents after Sunday school or in the hallway, small talk with leaders before the elders meeting, even at the grocery store bumping into the person who sits in the fourth pew, left side every Sunday. Most people, most of the time, are not in crisis mode. Rather than creating a crisis, we can enter the everyday and bring the means of grace there in spiritual conversations. Pastors can do this. Teachers can do this. Normal people can do this. At church. At school. At the ball game.

Current parish life seems to have pastors so busy running the organizational structure of the congregation that they have little energy to devote to spiritual care. Consequently, parishioners have learned to seek out their pastors only in great emergencies, usually prefacing their contact with: “Pastor, I know you’re busy, but...” What follows is usually a request for counsel or advice in dealing with a difficult situation.

Pastors who take seriously their responsibility for soul cure will find that opportunities present themselves at every turn: in teaching, preaching, catechesis, sick calls, and requests for counsel. Even mere requests for advice may present opportunities for spiritual conversation. Spiritual conversation can lead to instruction, instruction to repentance, and repentance may open the door to confession, absolution, and healing. Spiritual care is not a one-time confrontation. The faithful *Seelsorger* follows the thread of the cure of the soul through each and every contact with his parishioners throughout their lifetimes.

Likewise, the faithful pastor will find occasional opportunity for direct communication with his parishioners regarding spiritual evaluation and cure. Substantive changes in life vocation (marriage, birth of a child, death of a parent or spouse, etc.), physical or mental illness, hardship, success, and many other situations in life present unique occasions to explore the health and healing of the soul.<sup>100</sup>

“Lord, how I loathe the big issues,” a sentence Eugene Peterson copied from one of C.S. Lewis’ letters, touches on this truth.<sup>101</sup> If there’s one thing that exasperates spiritual shepherds, it is our sheep not paying attention to the Good Shepherd until there’s something big going on, and then they’ve not trained their embodied souls to pay attention well. These are the parents who worship on Christmas (and maybe Easter) because their kids are in the program. If you know such a person

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<sup>98</sup> (Benner 1998, 190)

<sup>99</sup> In its section of survey about time spent in pastoral visitation, the *Pulpit & Pew* project discovered that a pastor’s time in visitation declined sharply in recent history, at least from the pastors’ viewpoint, “from over nineteen hours [per week] in 1934, to fourteen and a half hours in 1954, to just over nine hours in 2001. Although pastors nearly doubled their time counseling between 1954 and 2001, time spent in visitation dropped by over seven hours a week.” (Carroll 2006, 105)

<sup>100</sup> (Senkbeil 2001, 59,60)

<sup>101</sup> (Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* 1989, 115)

and he's a farmer, go ask him to show you how to milk cows. If she runs a cute little corner coffee café, change it up from Starbucks and spend your \$3.75 and 30 minutes in relational means of grace ministry. "The cure of souls is not a specialized form of ministry...but is the essential pastoral work. It is not a narrowing of pastoral work to its devotional aspects, but it is a way of life that uses weekday tasks, encounters, and situations as the raw material for teaching prayer, developing faith, and preparing for a good death."<sup>102</sup> This is caring for souls not necessarily connected to traditional church rites, and that's okay; both have their place in life and ministry.

Everyday small talk about God and spiritual conversations outside of worship or Bible study frequent the Scriptures, mostly because the heroes of faith we find there operated no church machinery like we do today as far as facilities, programs, and staff.<sup>103</sup> Jesus met people where they were at with the language of parables.<sup>104</sup> We sometimes speak of teachable moments in the nurture of our children. They present themselves so plainly sometimes, and in my experience it was often only after I missed the opportunity that I realized the open door I just passed by. Yet this helped me prepare better for the next teachable moment and pray for my Father to help me be more than a "quality time" father but better an "all the time" father. Being in the moment with people is relational ministry that cares for souls. Find those moments. Bring Christ there. And don't leave too soon.

## Group care

The popularity of social networking on the Internet has multiplied such moments. The recently launched WELS Facebook page is taking off and even surpassing the traditional WELS web site in its popularity.<sup>105</sup> Group interactivity among friends—even Facebook friends—offers another opportunity for relational means of grace ministry. Like this thread on the WELS Facebook page:

(Original post): I am very concerned for my salvation. I know that Jesus died on the cross to forgive us our sins, however, many years ago I committed adultery and got a divorce. I fear

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<sup>102</sup> (Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* 1989, 59)

<sup>103</sup> How often did Noah, that "preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), bring God to his workplace and from his workplace in conversations while conspicuously building the huge ark? The prophets preached both to public audiences but also in spiritual conversations of everyday moments with kings, widows, family members, neighbors, and seminary students. Paul didn't need a visitor's badge for his prison ministry because he passionately brought Christ to wherever he encountered people (during a conversation about witnessing, I once heard someone suggest that we not only bring people to Christ but bring Christ to people).

<sup>104</sup> The small talk and the everyday of spiritual conversations (like parables) need not dumb down the kingdom of God and the saving of souls. "Parables sound absolutely ordinary: casual stories about soil and seeds, meals and coins and sheep, bandits and victims, farmers and merchants...As people heard Jesus tell these stories, they saw at once that they weren't about God, so there was nothing in them threatening their own sovereignty. They relaxed their defenses. They walked away perplexed, wondering what they meant, the stories lodged in their imagination. And then, like a time bomb, they would explode in their unprotected hearts. An abyss opened up at their very feet. He *was* talking about God; they have been invaded!...Parables aren't illustrations that make things easier; they make things harder by requiring the exercise of our imaginations, which if we aren't careful becomes the exercise of our faith...Parables trust our imaginations, which is to say, our faith. They don't herd us paternalistically into a classroom where we get things explained and diagrammed. God does not impose his reality from without; he grows flowers and fruit from within. God's truth is not an alien invasion but a loving courtship in which the details of our common lives are treated as seeds" (Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*. 1989, 32,33)

<sup>105</sup> The WELS Facebook page, since its launch in May 2010, has attracted 9,000 people who "like" it; 5,000 of them are active monthly users, and the majority of them are not called workers. Within the first few months of its introduction, the WELS Facebook page had more people like it than the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (this has reversed in recent months as mid-size companies have taken up the Facebook craze). In May 2011 the WELS Facebook page connected to 282,811 post views (number of times anyone viewed a wall post, even repeated views, and views appearing on a person's page) as compared to 106,373 total visits to the WELS website (including repeat visits) during the same period. (Hochmuth, Joel, WELS Director of Communications, interview by Daron Lindemann, conversations during May/June 2011)

that breaking one of God's Ten Commandments is a sin punishable by damnation to hell. Would God forgive me for this sin?

(Comment): I'm banking on forgiveness ...

(Comment): We all sin. All sins are punishable by damnation to hell. That's why Jesus died to save us from our sins...ALL of our sins! The ten commandments (sic) didn't rate the seriousness of our sins...break one, break them ALL.

(Comment): All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

(Comment): And we are all forgiven by the sacrifice of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To believe that we will be still punished for our sins is like doubting God and the sacrifice Jesus suffered for us...

(Comment): forgiven (sic) through faith ... no other way.

(Comment): Forgiven by Christ salvation no other way!

(Comment): I am Lutheran (ELCA). I wanted to say that I have also wondered if I am going to Hell for my sins eventhough (sic) I have repented (not adultery). What I read here brought me peace. Thanks to my Lutheran brothers and sisters, even from a different synod for the reminders of God's mercy and love

In God's creating activity only one thing on that sixth day prevented it from receiving God's accolade of "good." Aloneness. God solved that by creating a companion for Adam. The companionship of another—whether in God's institution of marriage or in the friendships we treasure—is a gift. Friendship blesses people in special ways not usually enjoyed in other relationships, especially professional relationships like pastors, teachers, and staff ministers. Church professionals can think and act more relationally at given opportunities, and they can also plan and promote groups where non-professionals can interact with each other in ways that draw out the faith, hope, and love of Christians otherwise reserved in deference for the trained skills of the professional. What many pastors and teachers have discovered about the organic interactivity of peer partners and breakout groups in the classroom setting for discussion, study, and projects also applies to the wider relational ministry of the church. Groups help God's people grow and let them shine, serving and being served, caring and being cared for, learning, and discovering that Christ's calling belongs not only to the professionals. Ministry is multiplied. And God saw that it was good.<sup>106</sup>

Christians are going to enjoy the fellowship of friendships. Why not capitalize on the eager and organic nature of Christian friendships by creating more arenas for relational means of grace ministry? More "one another-ness" that multiplies gospel ministry and cares for souls like the Christians in the early church.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> In the same paragraph where he mentions his "priestly duty," Paul also empowers the Roman Christians, "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another" (Romans 15:14). And Luther on relationships: "We see Christ, who is struggling with temptation in the garden, look for comfort in the society of three disciples (Matt. 26:40). When Paul sees brethren coming toward him (Acts 28:15), the very sight of these revives his spirit, and he feels comforted...Therefore solitude is to be avoided. We should long for the society of people we know, especially in times of dangerous spiritual troubles...As for myself, I judge the loss of all one's possessions easier to bear than the loss of a faithful friend." (Plass 1959, 1326,527)

<sup>107</sup> "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every

You may be called to serve some of the friendliest Christians, yet discover that being a friendly church is nice but not enough. Additionally in some cases, being a big church has its benefits but also its challenges, especially related to Christians connecting in meaningful friendships that extend means of grace ministry. Spend some time analyzing this challenge, studying the Scriptures, researching the pros and cons of group ministry through reading as well as evaluating group life in other churches, and relating all of it to your local context. In what ways can your church or school intentionalize relational ministry with groups?<sup>108</sup>

## **BRAINSTORM**

What groups currently exist, whose relationships could provide a starting place for more intentional means of grace ministry?

What ideas for group ministry have you had or heard?

## **Pastoral care**

Dear pastor,

When you were ordained into the holy ministry and installed to care for souls in this congregation, we called you to follow the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. He is our Savior and you represent him among us.

When we call upon you for greater leadership and act as if the success of the church rests on your shoulders, remember your Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and follow him. It may seem that nothing can be done without a dramatic and dominant leadership style but, when it is a matter of nurture and growth for the flock over time, the servant is the model. Moses and Elijah came down from the mountain, after all. Come down to us. Be with us. What we need more than your greatness is your servanthood—patient and loving, kind and caring. If you aren't sure what this looks like in your ministry or if you are doing it well, please ask us. We care about you and our ministry together.

When we expect that you are responsible for getting things done effectively in the congregation, remember that people matter more than things. Be effective with *people* and efficient with *projects*. Projects aren't as urgent as we make them seem, and although they have deadlines, they don't have souls like people do. People matter.

When we come to you with our problems, expecting you to make them all better, before diagnosing solutions or making everything okay, help us first see the grace of God operating in our lives. This is the theology of the cross. Help us in our weakness see Christ as our strength and shield, entering our troubles and our suffering as Savior even in the storm. Your job is not to create the church triumphant, solving problems and calming every wind and wave of which we are afraid, but to care for our souls. Before rescuing us, be with us. And bring Jesus Christ, our only Savior.

When we look to you for all the right answers, make room for small talk, for open dialogue, for spiritual conversation, and for listening to us. We don't want you to have an answer for every question, because it helps us search the Scriptures and seek the righteousness of God as his own people. It gives us greater ownership of our faith, our congregation, and its ministry. It puts *us* on the agenda, too.

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day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42-47).

<sup>108</sup> See Appendix D on p. 36 for a description of our experience at Grace Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, WI adding a group structure for relational ministry. Other churches have also done this, and in some ways better. Here's our story.

When the pressures exerted on your pastoral professionalism begin hardening it into ecclesiastical impersonalism, when you want to be more relational in your means of grace ministry but don't know where to begin, turn first to your Lord. Spend more time with him—personal time. A closed room and safe place, just you and your Lord, with no other projects or worries. Nobody needing you but rather you needing your Lord. Nobody calling you but your Lord, who bid every one of his disciples, "Come," before commanding them, "Go." Learn to be more relational with your Lord. You matter to him, and to us. Then take time to be relational outside the day-to-day operations of this congregation. Develop friendships with others. Enjoy hobbies. Eat and exercise because you are a person, not just a pastor. Stay healthy and fit so that your First Article gifts can serve and support our Second and Third Article ministry.

When your job becomes running the church from Sunday to Sunday with institutional duties, much like running a house where the to-do list grows as fast as the summer grass, practice the virtue of building a home, not running a house. You're not the manager of the lawn but the caregiver of the family. Nurture us with the peaceful pastures of Christ's love. Lead us on the paths of Christ's righteousness by walking alongside of us in a relationship. Restore souls. Comfort us. The house of the Lord is not a structure or a system but a shepherd calling the Good Shepherd's sheep closer, safer, farther. We are following.

Thank you for being our shepherd and pastor.

Pastors, more than encouragement from God's people, consider encouragement from God's Word in the spiritual leaders of the Scriptures who understood and practiced relational ministry to embodied souls.<sup>109</sup> "It is okay to be people, after all." With all that said, the person who matters most in your pastoral ministry is you. Understand that correctly, however, defined by Paul's words,

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. (1 Timothy 1:12-15)

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<sup>109</sup> **Solomon's** ruling in the case of the protesting prostitutes saved an innocent child because part of his God-given wisdom was understanding human nature, and he applied it as leader of God's people (1 Kings 3:18-28). People matter. **Moses**, after he learned from the terror of murder that he didn't need to be needed, benefitted from understanding his need to be networked. The people surrounding Moses—**Miriam** (Exodus 15:1,20,21), **Jethro** (Exodus 18), and **Aaron** (Exodus 4:14; 17:12)—filled in gaps, provided support, and equipped him to become a better leader. People matter. **Mordecai** respected both the direction he saw for God's people and the decision of Esther as to her personal participation. No bullying, no crisis mode of laying guilt trips on her if she doesn't get more involved. His trust in the work of God wasn't reduced to depending on her (Esther 4:14). People matter. **Joseph** could have divorced Mary and possibly changed the setting of redemptive history, but his spiritual leadership trusted in the Lord's word and took into account the Lord's work amidst the messiness of human and divine, physical and spiritual (Matthew 1:18-25). People matter. Saul was made new in conversion and became the new guy on the team, but his past preceded him and "he tried to join the disciples but they were all afraid of him, not believing he really was a disciple" (Acts 9:26). **Barnabas** took a chance, took the risen Christ at his word, and took Saul by the hand knowing that even big boys need handholding once in a while. People matter. Saul took up the name Paul, neither ashamed of the gospel nor ignorant of the people to whom he proclaimed its power for salvation. Trapped in accusations at a Sanhedrin assembly, **Paul** demonstrated a working knowledge of people and relationships by appealing to his belief in the resurrection. The Sadducees, who "say that there is no resurrection" (Acts 23:8), protested so vehemently that the men of the Sanhedrin turned on each other in debate, raging into a mob scene so violent that the commander rescued Paul. People matter.

Pastors, who you are and how you see yourself as Christ Jesus our Lord sees you, saves you, and strengthens you makes more of a difference in your pastoral calling than any other person. There is only one you. Nobody else wears your fingerprints or carries your personality and gifts. Nobody else, in your view, sins more. This focus of reality—of faith, really—is the foundation of relational ministry, the interest in administering the means of grace to people who are no different than you in their sins. And in their Savior. His abundant grace and love appoint you, your history, your personality, your strengths and weaknesses, even your potential to the public ministry. You matter, after all. Christ cares for your soul first before calling you to care for others, and when he calls you he calls all of (who) you (are). Lead as a sheep. Follow as a shepherd.

## **Caring for souls: people matter**

Today we have listened once again for that calling of Christ. In his promising shepherd's voice. At our dirty feet cleansed by his care-full living water. Throughout his ministry to all kinds of people and "sinners." And certainly on the cross where our shame found its end. The inspired Word of God instructed us that souls on this earth belong to bodies and bodies to souls, therefore when we minister we do so to the whole person. The creating, redeeming, and sanctifying work of God gives and renews value to people—after all, God is relational himself and equips his children to be relational in our love to him and others. The practices of relational means of grace ministry sometimes indirectly support the gospel and sometimes directly serve people with the gospel, the visible church striving to keep in step with the invisible church.

The means of grace enrich, equip, engage, empower, and encourage people, with pastoral rites, and through personal relationships. And often both wonderfully at the same time.

Those cards just get in the way.

Cluttering his window sill next to his desk they try their best to remain standing on edge but some of them are starting to curl and droop a little bit. That's okay. They may not look pretty, but they mean a lot to him. He knocks them over when he reaches for his blinds and, not so bothered, really, repositions them, appreciating the people they represent. The fine graphic images on the front of the cards don't catch his eye as much as the photos tucked lovingly inside a few of them, photos of souls in his care. He can see them—smiling. The perfect rhyme and rhythm of the professional poetry was a good read, but when he takes a peek at a few of the cards on a difficult day now and then, he re-reads the handwritten sentences, some of them in sloppy handwriting. The design and poetry of Hallmark—well, anyone can buy that for a couple bucks. The relationships of people, of souls to whom and with whom he ministers, these matter more. Even as they matter to Christ, and his love, and his calling.

"Do as I have done for you ... You will be blessed," Christ speaks with command *and* promise. This is our calling.

61<sup>st</sup> Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Luther Preparatory School in Watertown, WI  
July 26, 2011  
Daron J. Lindemann

## Appendix A – Caring for Souls: People Matter

### Psalm 77:1-12

Identify the thinking, willing, and feeling of the author's soul in this psalm by circling the words that indicate such. Mark each with a **T** for thinking, a **W** for willing, or an **F** for feeling.

- <sup>1</sup> I cried out to God for help;  
I cried out to God to hear me.
- <sup>2</sup> When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;  
at night I stretched out untiring hands  
and my soul refused to be comforted.
- <sup>3</sup> I remembered you, O God, and I groaned;  
I mused, and my spirit grew faint.
- <sup>4</sup> You kept my eyes from closing;  
I was too troubled to speak.
- <sup>5</sup> I thought about the former days,  
the years of long ago;
- <sup>6</sup> I remembered my songs in the night.  
My heart mused and my spirit inquired:
- <sup>7</sup> "Will the Lord reject forever?  
Will he never show his favor again?"
- <sup>8</sup> Has his unfailing love vanished forever?  
Has his promise failed for all time?
- <sup>9</sup> Has God forgotten to be merciful?  
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"
- <sup>10</sup> Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:  
the years of the right hand of the Most High."
- <sup>11</sup> I will remember the deeds of the LORD;  
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
- <sup>12</sup> I will meditate on all your works  
and consider all your mighty deeds.

## Appendix B – Caring for Souls: People Matter

The balance between caring for the means of grace and caring for the people it saves and serves challenges us. So does the balance between caring for the means of grace and for the people—fellow called workers—administering it. Jesus shepherds us here, too. Both Martin Franzmann and Prof. Forrest Bivens urge our relational interests here, too. Caring synodically for fellow pastors, teachers, and staff ministers is also our calling.

Read and reflect on their encouragements below. First, consider Franzmann’s presentation of being called to greatness. Then, turn the page and contemplate which of Brother Bivens’ many resolves or renewals is a battleground in your heart where you need the Spirit’s work to fight off flesh, world, and Satan. Be honest with yourself and take it home by transferring a key word or two from this appendix to the text box on p. 18 of this essay, taking it with you to bring to God later.

In a sermon on Luke 1:15, “For he will be great in the sight of the Lord,” Franzmann writes:

John the Baptist is the only man in the New Testament who is called great in a laudatory sense, except, of course, the Man Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. And yet he of all men is totally unconcerned about any greatness of his own...What does it look like, this greatness of John the Baptist, this Advent greatness?

It is marked, first of all, by a great and free independence. By throwing himself wholly upon God and upon His greater Coming One, and by depending completely upon Him, John made himself free of everyone and everything else. He was free from the passion for conformity to patterns. He broke them all. He broke the Judaic pattern...he called men away from the settled sanctities of the temple and the synagogues, from all their hallowed habituations, and called them into the desert to confront there the bare majesty of [God]...

We with our awed respect for patterns, our passion for belonging, our avidity for acceptance, our yearning for the security of a certified mediocrity, our fear of renouncing the majority. It’s nice to be normal, it’s nice to be accepted, it’s nice to belong...With independence comes that quality which we find hard to give a single name to. The Bible calls it *parrhesia*, boldness, confidence, the courage for antagonism, if you will. John...bade all Israel, without exception, all the pietists of penance, all the hierarchy, everybody, to put themselves on a level with the dirty Gentile and be washed with his Baptism of repentance unto the remission of sin. Does this quite square with our idea of the good, solid church in a good, solid neighborhood, with a nice sign out in front, the church which pays its debts, including the debt of lip service to a pattern...?

So we are funny-looking figures too, we who inherit John the Baptist’s mouth, finger, and voice, as Luther put it ... John renounced all bigness, and he became great in the sight of the Lord. (Franzmann, Martin H., Feuerhahn, Ronald, ed. *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966, 1994, 25-30)

In an essay on spiritual renewal, Prof. Forrest Bivens writes:

“Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more” (I Th 4:9-10). Love for fellow saints is a cherished gift from God and a key expression of spiritual renewal...

Our resolve is not simply to be ‘loyal to the organization’ for the survival or expansion of the institutional church. Our resolve is to guard tongue and hand that we treat brothers as brothers, implying testimony and discipline, encouragement and rebuking—but requiring love in all things...

The temptation will remain among us to decry any... synod structure [as] being placed above or against kingdom concerns. The temptation will likewise remain for organizational overseers to lament what appears to be local parochialism and offer solutions without the benefit of an on-site appraisal of how the kingdom fares in a given locality.

Let us resolve to observe together how terrifically frustrating our ministries can be in this world...Pastors and teachers scrap for time to devote themselves to the diligent and devotional study of Scripture that renewal might flourish through their ministries. Administrators also seek and make plans for renewal emphases but are unable personally to apply law and gospel in many classrooms and congregations to further the cause. Let us resolve to remember our shared frustrations.

Let us resolve to confess the presence of a pope within each of us that ultimately seeks a renewal that is neither radical nor truly relational, but merely a reaffirmation of personal prestige. The tendency is to do what we want at the expense of our gracious God’s honor and our fellow laborers’ good name. These and similar temptations are like the poor; they are always with us.

Let us also resolve to “be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (Ja 1:19-20). The diligent perusal of Scripture again and again reminds us how difficult it often is to appraise another’s faith and life without divine declaration...Relational renewal, flowing from heart and mind, will check improper tendencies and nourish the mutual and brotherly application of law and gospel. Concerning this we may be quick to speak.

Let us therefore resolve to seek radical and relational renewal for and with one another. (Bivens, Forrest. "Spiritual Renewal as Expressed in the Christian's Life." Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File)

## Appendix C – Caring for Souls: People Matter

David Benner identifies a list of characteristics that identify Jesus as the model soul shepherd in his dealings with people (Benner, David G. *Care of Souls: Revisioning Christian Nurture and Counsel*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998, 27,28).

- met them where they were
- was compassionate
- acted out of an explicit moral context but was never condemning
- spoke with authority
- invited choice
- asked probing questions
- affirmed faith responses
- was scandalously inclusive
- set limits and took care of himself
- dealt with each person uniquely and individually
- related in a manner that affirmed people's value
- was never coercive or manipulative
- spoke in ordinary language
- didn't minimize the costs of discipleship
- dealt at the level of motivation, not just behavior
- preferred dialogue over monologue
- respected, but wasn't limited by, cultural norms
- demonstrated a holistic respect for the close relationship of body and soul
- never allowed his own needs to get in the way of meeting the needs of others
- challenged people never to settle for less than God's best for them
- gave in proportion to receptivity and spiritual hunger
- invited engagement, not passive receptivity
- gave what people needed, not what they asked for
- identified embedded spiritual issues
- allowed people to ignore or reject his help
- gave himself, not just advice
- accepted the trust people placed in him

## Appendix D – Caring for Souls: People Matter

### Group life

You may be called to serve some of the friendliest Christians, yet discover that being a friendly church is nice but not enough. Additionally in some cases, being a big church has its benefits but also its challenges, especially related to Christians connecting in meaningful friendships that extend means of grace ministry. Spend some time analyzing this challenge, studying the Scriptures, researching the pros and cons of group ministry through reading as well as evaluating group life in other churches, and relating all of it to your local context. In what ways can your church or school intentionalize relational ministry with groups?

This is what we did at Grace Lutheran Church, and the result was creating a number of new opportunities for relational ministry both serving and supporting the means of grace. We now foster group life among our diversified membership in three areas: 1) a system of Grace Groups where we want people to be connected and cared for, 2) an intentional support of common interest groups (some of which already exist like the choir or the softball team, and others we created, for instance a new running club and a reading club), and 3) we are beginning to form some support groups, starting with a grief support group. Next on the list is a focused effort on groups devoted to Bible study.

What has become key is the connecting point between the groups and the ministry of the wider congregation, and we've made concerted efforts to manage that intersection. The intent is for each to complement the other. Wider ministry adapts itself to group participation which in turn strengthens souls who are active in wider ministry. So, for example, we encourage groups to attend our church-wide Bible studies, participate in our church-wide summer Bible reading, or sit at our church picnic—as their own group. We provide service opportunities, like preparing fellowship meals before Advent and Lent services, and promote them for groups to sign up and own them. Some groups have even decided to take on the annual responsibility of an evangelism, education, or fellowship event.

Finally, group life at Grace is where our new member nurture (assimilation) happens, rather than in large scale settings like worship. Group life, initially partnered with pastoral instruction, eventually takes over in the new member nurture process. All new members, whether confirmands or professions of faith or WELS transfers, participate in new member nurture.

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