

# **Mission and Ministry Principles and Practical Observations and Suggestions**

## **The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations**

### **Introduction**

In 2023 Res. 1-02A, the Synod directed the Commission on Theology and Church Relations [CTCR] “expeditiously to prepare a document on Lutheran theological principles for mission and ministry that would address the theological and practical issues faced by small congregations and multi-congregational parishes.” It also asked “that these principles be disseminated to the Office of the President, the Council of Presidents, and the Pastoral Formation Committee as a basis for considering how the Synod might provide for the ongoing pastoral needs of small congregations and multi-congregation parishes.”

At its February 2024 meeting, the CTCR adopted a document titled “Mission and Ministry Principles and Suggestions—for COP Discussion.” This document was presented to and discussed by the COP at its February 2024 meeting. Input by the COP was considered by the CTCR, and a revised document was approved for wider distribution, use and discussion at the CTCR’s May 2024 meeting.

It is important to note that this document has two distinct (and distinctly different) sections. The first section, “Theological Principles,” was drafted and approved by the CTCR with the conviction that the principles enunciated here are theologically sound and fully in keeping with historic Lutheran and LCMS doctrine and practice. Although these principles are (by their very nature) summary statements and therefore do not say everything that could be said on the issues they address, the Commission believes that they are fully correct and orthodox in what they do say and affirm. These principles should not engender debate or disagreement among Lutherans committed to the authority of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

The second section of the document contains “Practical Observations and Suggestions.” Although the Commission believes that there is nothing in this section that is theologically incorrect or erroneous, it does not expect or anticipate that all readers of this document who are equally committed to the authority of Scripture and the Confessions will agree about the relevance of the observations offered or the wisdom of the practical suggestions made in this section. In fact, as the Commission “brainstormed” and developed this section of the document, it did so fully recognizing that there was not complete unanimity on the Commission itself about the helpfulness or feasibility of every suggestion offered here—only that none of them was theologically out of bounds. Moreover, the CTCR does not claim to have the competence—nor, for that matter, the responsibility or authority—to determine or dictate practical solutions to the serious, disparate and localized challenges that prompted this assignment.

Readers and users of this document are urged to bear in mind what the CTCR explicitly says in point 2 of the second section of the document, **“The following ideas are for discussion and consideration especially among members of the COP, but ultimately including districts, circuits, and congregations (especially vacant congregations). While some may be deemed inadvisable or unworkable in certain circumstances, it is the opinion of the CTCR that all are theologically legitimate”** (emphasis added).

## **Theological Principles**

1. Salvation comes to God's people through Word and Sacrament.
  - a. God sent His Son to redeem sinners and only in the holy life, atoning suffering and death, and glorious resurrection of Christ Jesus is there life and salvation (John 3:16-18; LC III, 54, KW edition throughout).
  - b. Salvation is bestowed by the Holy Spirit who makes God's gracious promises known to sinners as they hear and believe the Word of the Gospel proclaimed, read, and enacted in the sacraments (Rom 10:17; AC V; LC II, 37, 45).
2. The church receives and extends this Gospel through the ministry of Word and Sacrament.
  - a. Those who hear and believe the Gospel are the church—Christ's baptized, holy, priestly people, his disciples (Matt 28:19-20; Acts 2:37-41; 1 Peter 2:9; AC V).
  - b. Even as Christ, by the Holy Spirit, gathers the church by the Gospel, he also sends forth the church with the Gospel to all nations, for faith is "sparked by the word" (Luke 24:44-49; Ap IV 73).
  - c. The church extends the Gospel as believers make provision for the Gospel to be proclaimed and administered in their assembly and in the daily lives (vocations) of believers (Rom 10:17; 1 Pet 2:9; AC VII, VIII; Ap XIII, 11).
  - d. The local church, or assembly of Christians, is the primary place for sinners to hear the Word and receive the sacraments for their salvation (for examples, see Acts 15:30 or the first verses of Paul's epistles to churches such as Rom 1:7, 1 Cor 1:2, 2 Cor 1:1, etc.).
3. God extends the Gospel through baptized believers in the various circumstances of daily life.
  - a. Baptized believers are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).
  - b. Christians share the Gospel in the context of their vocations at home, with coworkers, and with others (Acts 8:1b-8; 1 Peter 2:9; 3:14-15).
  - c. Parents have the special responsibility and privilege to bring their children to baptism and to nurture and catechize them in the home (Matt 19:13-15; Acts 2:39; Eph 6:4; AC IX; SC heading for each part).
4. The pastoral ministry is the means God uses to preach the Word and administer the sacraments in the local congregation.
  - a. God sets apart biblically qualified men for the office of making the Gospel known (the office of public ministry or pastoral office) in both word and sacred act in the church's congregations (John 20, 21; Acts 20:17-32; 1 Cor 12:9; Eph 4:11; AC XIV; Ap XIV, 4).
  - b. Those who serve in the pastoral office are to meet certain biblical qualifications of a moral, vocational, and theological nature (1 Tim 3:1-7; 2 Tim 2:15-16a, 22-25a; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Pet 5:1-3).
  - c. Therefore, the local congregation is comprised of pastors and laity, preachers and hearers, who work together reciprocally in the ministry of the church (1 Cor 4:1-5; Tr 11).
  - d. The office of the public ministry is required for a congregation and is not merely optional, so that the Gospel may be heard and received sacramentally (1 Cor 12:29; Eph 4:11; Titus 1:5; AC XXVIII 5, 8; Ap XIII, 12; FC SD II, 38).

5. The church selects those who will occupy the pastoral office through an orderly process.
  - a. Only one who is rightly called by God through the church is to preach and administer in the congregation's assembly (1 Cor 12:29; AC XIV; AC XXVIII, 8-9; Ap XIII, 11-13).
  - b. The right calling (*rite vocatus, ordentlicher Beruf*) may take place in various ways, but it always includes the choosing, calling, and ordaining of ministers (Titus 1:5; Tr 67).<sup>1</sup> A right calling is necessary so that the congregation knows that God has placed this man into the office of preaching and administering the sacraments (Ap XIII, 12).<sup>2</sup>
  - c. The *manner* of choosing, calling, and ordaining ministers for confessional Lutherans is determined not by biblical mandate, but by mutual agreement in love for one another.
  - d. The LCMS process for right calling includes *choosing* candidates for the office by the Synod's seminary faculties or colloquy committee, *calling* them by a congregation, and *ordaining* (appointing them) under the ecclesiastical supervision of a district president (see Tr 67).
6. Exceptional circumstances do not make the pastoral office optional for congregational life.
  - a. While it is common for congregations at some point to lose the pastor who has served them, such loss is to be addressed in an orderly manner so that another LCMS pastor can serve them; this includes during their time of vacancy.
  - b. If a pastor is not available to serve a congregation for a given time, the congregation still assembles to give thanks, hear Scripture, pray for a pastor to be available to serve them, and be catechized in the truth of God's Word.<sup>3</sup>
  - c. If a congregation lacks an ordained pastor to carry out the responsibilities of the public ministry in an orderly and regular manner and persistently remains in this status, it is no longer functioning in accordance with God's design for the local expression of the church.<sup>4</sup>
  - d. Therefore, congregations unable to secure pastoral care in such an orderly and regular manner should consider working together with one or more other congregations in some manner, in consultation with the district president, so that regular pastoral care can be secured (a dual or multiple point parish or a "circuit rider" type of ministry).
  - e. Congregations and pastors of the Synod should not shirk the responsibility to help other congregations address legitimate needs for pastoral ministry (2 Corinthians 8:14).
  - f. A vacant congregation that refuses arrangements for pastoral care when they are available, and instead prefers to meet without a rightly called pastor, ceases to be a Lutheran congregation.<sup>5</sup>
  - g. While the foregoing points (6. a-f.) refer to vacant congregations, the important work of evangelism and outreach also goes beyond sharing the Gospel with individuals and always includes the eventual goal of incorporation in a congregation that is served by a pastor.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, at the time of the Reformation, different entities (e.g. consistories or city councils) called ministers. While such a practice is different from our process that ends with a voters assembly decision, it is nonetheless an acceptable approach to a "right calling."

<sup>2</sup> See also CTRC, *Theology and Practice of "the Divine Call"* (2003).

<sup>3</sup> See CTRC, "President of Synod Request for Opinion on Lay Reading of Sermons and Conduct of Worship in the Absence of a Pastor" (April 2023).

<sup>4</sup> That is, the preaching office or the pastoral office is established by God and is not optional for the church.

<sup>5</sup> The district president, in consultation with colleagues, will need to define such a refusal.

## **Practical Observations and Suggestions**

1. The LCMS cannot assume that the challenges of providing pastoral care for its congregations will lessen in the foreseeable future. Several demographic factors are significant here, namely,
  - a. The aging of the total population and, in particular, White Americans (Synod's predominant racial/ethnic group);
  - b. The shrinking of rural and small town America's population (where the LCMS has many congregations);
  - c. The declining level of religious involvement in the youngest age cohorts of the US;
  - d. In addition the increasing numbers of immigrant and non-White populations in the US are a missionary and evangelistic challenge that the LCMS must seek to address and for which the Synod needs to choose, call, and ordain ministers.
2. These factors strongly suggest that the Synod must engage in a multi-pronged approach to address the need for pastoral care. The following ideas are for discussion and consideration especially among members of the COP, but ultimately including districts, circuits, and congregations (especially vacant congregations). While some may be deemed inadvisable or unworkable in certain circumstances, it is the opinion of the CTCR that all are theologically legitimate.
  - a. Extending the service of the Synod's ordained ministers.
    - i. Encourage LCMS pastors to serve as vacancy pastors whenever possible.
    - ii. Confident in the work of the Holy Spirit through the divine call, encourage LCMS pastors to be open to consider calls to underserved areas of the country, intercultural congregations and missions, urban mission and outreach, and other ministry settings where the harvest is plentiful but our laborers are few.
    - iii. Encourage pastors and candidates to learn second languages for ministry, especially when they are serving in places where there are significant populations that speak a language other than English.
    - iv. Encourage our pastors and candidates to be open to calls to multipoint parish ministries.
    - v. Encourage retired pastors of the LCMS in good health to serve vacancies and to consider short-term relocations to serve in areas where there are many congregations that need assistance.
  - b. Increasing our commitment to residential seminary education
    - vi. Continue and expand high school summer experiences ("camps") for male students from Synod's congregations that provide an exposure to the pastoral calling, and to college and seminary life.
    - vii. Identify potential ministry undergraduate students and subsidize their education on the college level, with special attention and commitment to students from ethnic and racial minorities.
    - viii. Encourage multi-lingual skills by funding intensive summer studies in Spanish and Mandarin (English, Mandarin, and Spanish are the most widely spoken languages; we also emphasize the need for theological literature in these and other languages).
    - ix. Continue the seminary policy of covering the cost of all tuition.
    - x. Reshape the seminary experience to prepare more students for intercultural and urban ministries in order to enable work in places with increasing immigrant and minority populations.

- xi. Develop more robust continuing education programs and expectations for all LCMS pastors—general and SMP.
- c. Strengthening our commitment to high quality theological education by extension
  - i. Continue the SMP program and emphasize the need for ongoing mentoring and intellectual/theological growth.
    - a) Adhere rigorously to SMP criteria for admission, discouraging the temptation to make SMP a means of avoiding the residential route toward ordination.
    - b) Ensure vigorous, ongoing mentoring for SMP candidates, vicars, and pastors with clear lines of accountability.
    - c) Encourage SMP individuals to continue their studies toward general ministry and to pursue further theological education.
    - d) Provide needed financial assistance for SMP candidates.
    - e) Develop a process by which, in limited and controlled circumstances, worthy individuals may be colloquized as Specific Ministry Pastors. This may include provision for strict background checks, additional theological education as needed, strong supervision and mentoring during and beyond the colloquy process, and other steps to discourage any temptation for this to become a means of avoiding the highest possible training for ministerial candidates.
  - ii. Continue the EIIT and Center for Hispanic Studies programs.
    - a) This is necessary in order to increase the numbers of confessional Lutheran pastors who can serve interculturally. (We should not, however, direct qualified and capable minority students away from residential pastoral education.)
    - b) Provide needed financial assistance for EIIT candidates.
    - c) Ensure vigorous, ongoing mentorship for all EIIT graduates.
- d. Expanding immigrant ministries by working with international partner churches to provide pastors for specific immigrant groups (e.g., African Immigrant congregations).
- e. When over a prolonged period of time there are no available pastors to serve a congregation, mission, or ministry, the Synod may address immediate and ongoing needs for care of such congregations through auxiliary ministers and lay leaders. It should be understood that any implementation of the following suggestions is to be done while continuing to make every effort to provide pastors to serve such congregations.
  - i. Flexibility regarding both service times and even the day of worship should be explored when there is a prolonged vacancy. Such changes as time and date may allow the development of a dual parish call or enable an ordained pastor to serve the congregation either regularly or occasionally.
  - ii. Called male commissioned ministers may lead Sunday services without the Lord's Supper as needed, utilizing sermons prepared by ordained ministers.
  - iii. Male laymen who are approved by districts and trained to lead services may lead Sunday worship without the Lord's Supper, utilizing sermons prepared by ordained ministers.
  - iv. Congregations may utilize commissioned ministers and other members of the royal priesthood to visit the sick, evangelize, catechize, and carry out other duties which are frequently carried out by pastors (not including the Sacrament of the Altar).
  - v. Our seminaries may be tasked with preparing sermons for use in vacant congregations and circumstances when a pastor is unavailable to lead a service, as

- well as developing curricula for training programs to equip commissioned ministers and designated laymen to serve in the foregoing ways.
- vi. In such circumstances, districts and circuits could develop ways to share the time and services of pastors. For example, a congregation might be asked to share its pastor on a monthly or other regular basis with congregations that have no other access to an ordained minister.

As helpful background to the preceding considerations and suggestions the reader may wish to consult some of the following documents:

1. *The Ministry in Its Relation to the Christian Church* (CTCR 1973)
2. *Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper* (CTCR 1983)
3. *The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature* (CTCR 1981)
4. *Theology and Practice of the Divine Call* (CTCR 2003)
5. *2013 Resolution 4-06A Task Force Report* (report to 2016 Convention)
6. *2016 Resolution 13-02A To Regularize Status of Licensed Lay Deacons Involved in Word and Sacrament Ministry*
7. *The Royal Priesthood: Identity and Mission* (CTCR 2018)
8. *To Extol and Equip the Blessed Partnership between the Royal Priesthood and the Office of the Public Ministry* (2016 Resolution 13-01A Task Force, report to 2019 Convention)
9. *Opinion on Lay Reading of Sermons and Conduct of Worship in the Absence of a Pastor* (CTCR Opinion, 2023).
10. *2019 Res. 6-03A To Enhance the Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) Program*

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