

Cultivating Quality Endeavors in Congregations: Reflections and Instances

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I know of a congregation in a community where the standard of excellence seemed to be not quality but quantity. People in that rather small city knew that if there was to be a PTA for a school, a board for the library, a Rotary Club, a Little League, and so on, volunteers would have to take on double and triple duty. They would wear two and three hats and more, to say nothing of participating in anything at church. The premium was placed on how many different things they did, not on how well they did them. For who could do such a wide variety of things well? Accordingly, quantity became the criterion of excellence instead of quality. It can be difficult for people with this mindset to set great store even by the need for quality in preaching and teaching God's word.

But we want to cultivate quality endeavors in congregations. To help toward doing so, the present essay first offers a few reflections for churches as they make efforts in this regard, including the work of pastors; auxiliary church office holders, such as teachers, DCEs, and deaconesses; and laypeople, singly and together. The second and longer part will offer three instances that might roughly be termed "case studies."

Reflections

It is appropriate to observe standard Lutheran cautions concerning good works, including good works done by sinful human beings in the church. We are not saved by anything we do, or that the Lord does through us. Our righteousness before God is alien righteousness, the righteousness of Christ's active and passive obedience. Nor are good works necessary to retain salvation. Humility, then, is very much in order. As Martin Luther said in a sermon on Romans 12, "[N]o matter how various the gifts, works, and outward life are, no one should think that he is good because of them and want to be better than others. Rather, everyone should think good of his own faith, which we all have, though not in the same measure, one stronger than another. However, what faith possesses is one and the same, namely, Jesus Christ."¹

¹ Martin Luther, *The Epistle for the First Sunday after Epiphany* (1525), in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976), vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–

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One does not even need to be a Christian to recognize that healthy organizations concentrate on their purposes instead of their processes.² It would be terrible to allow close examinations of method to upstage the Lord's great work of seeking and saving the lost into which he has brought into his church. As Kurt Marquart pointed out, concentrating on human activity in the church can render us "allergic to doctrine," possessing little patience for "precision, definition, and controversy" in the drive to get on with things.³ Nothing, however, should be allowed to displace the Lord as Lord of his church, exercising his gracious rule in her midst through his gospel.

Still, there is a time and place to consider methods and processes: how we carry out various human efforts in the church. If, as the Large Catechism says, the church is a means used by the Holy Spirit not only to begin but also to increase holiness on earth—"the mother that begets and bears every Christian" through God's Word⁴—then how she goes about her corporate life in this cause cannot be unimportant or unworthy of consideration. To be sure, we need to be much more concerned with what God has done and is still doing for our salvation than with anything we do. Yet the Lord works through efforts made by the church to bring people his saving word.

It is a false and empty prospect to try to energize the church or give it cohesion by rallying it around various methods we develop, or goals and benchmarks we set. Such goals and methods are fitting only in that they help the church point to Christ. If we are looking for quality in the church's work, the quality of testimony to our Lord and Savior stands out as of utmost importance.

Matters can go from bad to worse if we as churches try to advertise our quality to the wider world based on how well we are doing what we do. I have seen even Lutheran churches assuring the general public that they will hold themselves accountable to the highest standards, and so forth, but hardly ever do these standards have much to do with the saving gospel message. It would not be surprising if these churches were diverted from their message by the gravity of their methods.

When the centrality of Christ and his work is displaced in the church's descriptions of its activity, displacement in the heart may not be far behind. David Weber called attention to the attitude of the rich man in Jesus' story from Luke 12, about the man who wanted to build bigger and bigger barns but whose soul was suddenly required one night. With this foolish man, there was "no thanksgiving, no sense of

1986), vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), 76:190 (hereafter cited as AE).

² As noted by G. K. Chesterton. See Kurt Marquart, "Some Aspects of Healthy Church Life," in *Marquart's Works*, vol. 3, *Church and Ministry* (New Haven, MO: Lutheran News, 2014), 38.

³ Marquart, "Some Aspects of Healthy Church Life," 36.

⁴ See LC III 59, 42, trans. James Schaaf, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 439, 436.

the mystery of success, no appreciation for the many things outside his control.”⁵ Influenced by American pragmatism, we in American churches can begin to think of all our difficulties as problems for which there are solutions . . . if only we would think smarter or work harder. We could categorize the whole matter of cultivating quality in the church as just one more problem. Problems are things we can handle! In the words of an old saying, when you have a hammer in your hand, everything starts looking like a nail.

“Grace is not so tidy as to lend itself to lawlike predictability,” though. “We confess that God is trustworthy; we do not confess He is predictable.”⁶ As individuals are differently gifted by God, so are congregations. For example, some churches have stellar musicians in their midst, while others do not. We plow with the horses we have. Or, as stewardship scholar Helge Brattgård put it more elegantly, “Do what the situation makes possible.” Brattgård called this a motto for Christian stewardship.⁷ Even in the face of major setbacks, do what the situation makes possible.

Churches may need to focus on a few things that they can do well, which will likely be connected rather closely with the particular talents of individual members. Yet as congregations set about playing to their strengths, they would do well to act together as a body—not as a collection of individuals who are taking more or less the same path. Members can be helped to think corporately, like a team, pulling in the same direction and not at cross-purposes with one another, by deciding together about what to highlight.

Some of these decisions may not prove easy. A congregation may have to streamline some areas of its life. It might minimize certain pursuits in which it has been involved in the past. A church’s areas of strength require decision too: how precisely to improve on these strengths and utilize them?

There is nothing quite like working together. The effort of the whole can indeed amount to more than the sum of its parts. This reality invites us to devote as much attention as we can to congregational assimilation—or, as I prefer to call it, incorporation, being brought into the same body—in congregations not only large but also small. Such incorporation starts with sharing in Christ and his gifts that are common to all. It also includes taking due account of “First Article” endowments that differ from person to person. Organization and communication also stand out as important so as not to frustrate willing workers.

Even in the congregation to which I referred earlier, there was at least one endeavor at which they excelled: funeral dinners. Why was a funeral dinner there done so well? Members felt that a funeral dinner was within their grasp. They also

⁵ David K. Weber, “Account-ability,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2001): 48.

⁶ Weber, “Account-ability,” 56.

⁷ Helge Brattgård, *God’s Stewards: A Theological Study of the Principles and Practices of Stewardship*, trans. Gene J. Lund (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 73.

recognized the event's importance. No one had ever held a meeting there and reached any formal decision concerning funeral dinners. The consensus was informal yet quite real. Chances are, such informal understandings exist about at least *something* in every congregation. Our challenge may be to ferret these out, then build on them.

The gospel of the crucified and risen Christ frees us to do things as well as we can, also in the church. Unlike Reformed theology, Lutheran theology does not identify discipline as a mark of the church.⁸ Therefore we need not spin our mental wheels in negative thoughts about the way some congregation does not appear to be cultivating excellence as *we* think it should. For if a church remains the church despite a lack of discipline over matters clearly commanded in God's word, it also remains a church even though it may fail to meet anyone's human expectations.

Moreover, the good news of Christ addresses us when we grow discouraged about how ineffective we are or how meager our efforts seem to be. Such self-pity can often be mistaken as a sign of humility, but it really shows a certain self-centeredness. The gospel liberates us from all self-centeredness. We need not ignore the knock of opportunity because we are too busy pouring out our "woe is us" story to someone when it comes.

Through the gospel, the Holy Spirit gives the church the gift of seeing herself as God sees her in Christ. Called by the gospel, we trust solely in Christ our Savior, not even in the gifts he has given us. In Jesus' parable in Luke 19, it was the servant who knew his master to be a hard man who sat on his mina and did nothing with it. What can happen with us, who have seen in the Christ who paid for all our sins with his blood a mirror of the Father's own forgiving heart toward us?

According to the gospel, the church knows herself to be God's pilgrim people in this sinful world. Quality and excellence in using the things of this world, even within the church, is not where our heart belongs. Luther painted a striking picture in preaching on 1 Peter 2:

From this faith and hope do the office and work committed to you, which you are to do here, and nevertheless say, "That is not my treasure and the chief possession for which I live" (as the world, the Jews, the Turks, and the papacy live only for the sake of this), "but I regard all this temporal stuff like an inn, and flee it as a guest does the inn; for a time he certainly uses its food and lodging, and yet his heart always flees and thinks about where he belongs at home."⁹

⁸ See FC SD XII 34.

⁹ Martin Luther, *Third Sunday after Easter*, 1 Pet. 2:11–20 (1539), in AE 77:200. See LC I 47.

Instances

These three instances do not constitute detailed case studies. They are more generic. First will come two instances that challenge us to widen our understanding of high quality. Then will follow a third that might be called more open ended. On that one, I do not have a tidy word of advice to offer.

Cultivating Learning in the Church

Fine quality preaching or teaching is more than simply a matter of whether the preacher or teacher says everything correctly. In evaluating sermons or other examples of teaching, we should not stop with the question “Was there any false doctrine?”—or, positively put, “Was God’s word taught truly?”

Nonetheless, that question forms a necessary place to start. The church should teach nothing other than what Christ our Lord taught us through his apostles and prophets. As Jesus said, “you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers” (Matt 23:8 NIV).

There can be no substitute for clinging to his word, and his alone. With God’s word, we have the truth that sets us free (cf. John 8:31–32). Without it, no one else will give us the gospel of full and free salvation. Our Lord Jesus Christ is not only the author of the good news but also its subject. The gospel is about him and his work for us and for our salvation. Without him to take our place in death under God’s wrath and then live to tell the tale, there could be no salvation by grace through faith.

Further, as C. F. W. Walther amply pointed out, law and gospel must be properly distinguished. A sermon might not contain so much as one sentence that is false, yet it could still confuse law and gospel.¹⁰ We need to have more in view than whether we are making particular false statements.

It can be frighteningly easy to proclaim the gospel in such a way that it ends up sounding like law. As a first step in counteracting this tendency, homiletics professor Gerhard Aho used to advise students to bear in mind not only what the gospel *says* but also what it *does*. The gospel comforts consciences. It confers a divine dignity. It bestows riches. It breaks down barriers. It guarantees security. It gives purpose to life. My guess is that Aho would hardly claim that this list of things done by the gospel was exhaustive, but I am quite sure that he made this point: the law does none of these things.¹¹ Law needs to be explained and proclaimed as law, and the gospel needs to be explained and proclaimed as the good news it is for poor sinners.

¹⁰ See C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel: Thirty-Nine Evening Lectures*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), 30–41.

¹¹ Gerhard Aho, “Preaching the Gospel Without Making it Sound Like Law” (Concordia Theological Seminary, 1976), MP3 audio, accessed March 11, 2026, <https://media.ctsfw.edu/Weblink/ViewDetails/19013>.

So far, perhaps, so good. Pastors, and others too, generally understand and are quite concerned about teaching the truth of God and avoiding falsehood as well as about properly distinguishing between law and gospel. Those things have to do with the appropriateness of what the preacher or teacher says.

Yet it would be good also to place our feet as snugly as we can into the shoes of the hearer or learner. Think not only about the attributes of fine teaching in the church but also about what is needed for fine learning to take place in the church. For the measure of *learning* has to do not simply with what the teacher says, or how well the teacher says it. The measure of learning, finally, is what the learners take with them after a sermon or Bible class ends.

If preachers and teachers do not ask what people have learned, as perhaps distinct from what they themselves have said, it is easy to fall into what I sometimes call “the preacher’s fallacy.” This fallacy is to think that people have learned just because they were told something. In fact, here is the telltale sign of the preacher’s fallacy: when the preacher scratches his head over lackluster response and says to himself, “But I told them.” Well, preacher or teacher, maybe you did tell them. But:

- Did you tell them understandably? Did you use appropriate vocabulary? Did you assume too much prior knowledge on their part? Did you speak too rapidly?
- Did you tell them prominently? Or did you bury your most important point as number six out of ten?
- Did you tell them haphazardly? Was there relatively little planning or organization in a sermon or Bible class, so little that people could hardly follow along? Did a mass of biblical data come at people not only so fast but also so thick that it seemed nearly impenetrable? Did a line of thought end up zigzagging all over the place?
- Did you tell them sufficiently? Did you spend an appropriate amount of time on your key point? Or did you touch upon it so quickly that hearers could scarcely focus on it? If you were trying to emphasize a point, did you come back to it in the same message for recapitulation? Did you also return to it in subsequent messages for reinforcement? Part of the challenge here is to develop a long-range plan so you can devote adequate attention over time to matters that require emphasis.
- Did you tell them relevantly? God’s word is intrinsically relevant, of course, but often we need to point out its relevance. Did you talk in abstractions? Did you try to show why your point makes a difference to your hearers? Did you ask them any questions, including rhetorical questions?
- Did you tell them memorably? Luther noted that if a “discourse is heard without an example, no matter how suitable and excellent it may be, it

does not move the heart as much, and is also not so clear and easily retained.”¹² Therefore Luther liked histories, biblical and other.

- Did you tell them fervently? I am not referring to your emotion as you spoke. But did you beseech them by the mercies of God to do what they should?

Luther had little use for the clever preachers who loved to scale the heights of challenging biblical books like Daniel or Revelation but in the process left people ignorant of the basics. By contrast, in Luther’s view, “One ought to regard those teachers as the best and paragons of their profession those who present the catechism well—that is, who teach properly the Our Father, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed.”¹³ Of course, this meant more than only leading people to memorize these texts, but also drawing people little by little into these texts and their significance for the Christian life. As with Luther’s own teaching of the catechism, such thorough teaching must have involved comprehensibility, repetition, illustration, and application. “But such teachers are rare birds,” Luther went on. “For there is neither great glory nor outward show in their kind of teaching; but there is in it great good and also the best of sermons, because in this teaching there is comprehended, in brief, all Scripture.”¹⁴ Luther’s fine, rare-bird teachers were ultimately concerned not only with what they themselves *said* but also with what their hearers *learned*.

Practicing Evangelistic (or Other) Skills

Learning skills involves practicing them. In 2023, I surveyed Central Illinois District pastors about evangelism. Among other questions, I asked where, in their congregations’ Christian education programs, members learned to 1) begin a spiritual conversation, 2) listen discerningly to non-churched people, 3) make a simple statement of the gospel, and 4) make a case for the resurrection.

The results on paper appeared quite encouraging. For example, 87 percent of pastors responding said that people were learning to make a simple statement of the gospel in adult Bible class, and 74 percent said youth catechism classes were learning it—to say nothing of Sunday school, adult catechism, youth ministry, or retreats. When asked about beginning a spiritual conversation, 89 percent said that this was being learned in adult Bible class, and 62 percent answered thus for youth catechism. As to make a case for the resurrection, 91 percent of pastors said their adult Bible classes were learning this. The lowest response rates across the board came over listening discerningly to the non-churched. Seventy-two percent of pastors said that this was being learned in adult Bible class, and 34 percent said it was being learned

¹² Martin Luther, *Preface to Galeatius Capella’s History* (1538), in AE 34:275.

¹³ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Zechariah* (1527), in AE 20:157.

¹⁴ Luther, *Lectures on Zechariah*, 157.

in youth catechism. By our own admission, we seem to teach listening less than the other skills.

With respect to those others, though, the numbers look quite strong. So our Central Illinois congregations must have quite a few members who know how to begin a spiritual conversation, make a simple statement of the gospel, and make a case for the resurrection. But would the laypeople themselves likely say that? I wonder.

This is where I began to question the data. I started discussing it with pastors. Some seem to have responded positively if, say, a subject like beginning a spiritual conversation or defending the resurrection had come up one time in Bible class perhaps during the last year, and the pastor spent a few minutes on it. When he answered my questions, he checked the box. Circumstances were ripe for the preacher's fallacy to creep into the survey results. A pastor may have responded positively to one or more items because, after all, he had told them.

Also, I am not sure how closely our pastors looked at the phrasing of the survey question. It asked not where various things were *taught* but where people *learned* them. The measure of learning is not what the teacher said, but instead what people take with them. Where was the repetition? Was there any plan for reinforcement? A more extensive set of criteria for genuine quality may be needed.

The criteria can be refined, too, which is the present point. Notice that the four areas from the survey questions (beginning a spiritual conversation, listening discerningly to non-churched people, making a simple statement of the gospel, and making a case for the resurrection) are all skills. You do not teach skills the same way you teach knowledge and concepts.

Imagine someone who wants to learn to play the organ. A teacher introduces this pupil to organ design, delves into the history of the organ, plays recordings of great organ music, and so on. Yet this teacher never asks the pupil to touch the keys. Would anyone come away from organ instruction like that satisfied that he had learned to play the organ? Would any responsible organ teacher dare to claim that he had taught people to play the organ that way?

Of course not. Yet I fear that we have a lot of pastors and congregations who think they are teaching skills in evangelism merely by telling people about them. Telling people about the skills is a start, but sooner or later the learners need to practice.

In this instance, we can refine our criteria for quality a bit further still. Instruction works best when a particular skill level is specified. The four areas about which I asked lie at what might be called an intermediate level. They are not basic and elementary, nor are they highly sophisticated and specialized.

In the Missouri Synod, we have an evangelism instruction tool called *Every One His Witness*. It includes an introductory core module. It also offers rather specific

and specialized context modules on witnessing to Muslims, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, unchurched adult children, and many more. When I surveyed our pastors, I deliberately asked about four areas that lie between the two extremes of very basic and very specific in *Every One His Witness*.

My favorite football team is the Green Bay Packers, the Lombardi teams of the 1960s. Their staple offensive play was the power sweep, two pulling guards escorting a running back around end. It was simple in concept, but Coach Lombardi drilled the Packers to run this play against every conceivable defensive deployment. They would run it a little differently depending on, say, precisely where the strong safety lined up. In other words, they went all the way in their skill development to a level of intricacy comparable to learning to witness to a Muslim or a Mormon.

Yet in every case, the sweep always consisted of one running back going around end, following two pulling guards. In other words, the Packers had a basic play. They did not try to get by with a vague intention to advance the ball by running, blocking, and passing. There is much more to say about witnessing than simply to express a need for listening, asking, seeking, sharing, inviting, and encouraging.¹⁵

We need "plays," as it were. We need specific ways to begin an evangelistic conversation, listen discerningly to the unchurched, make a simple statement of the gospel, and defend the resurrection. The LCMS Central Illinois District is now offering "witnessing helps" that provide suggestions in each of these four areas.¹⁶

By themselves, though, these witnessing helps do not provide practice. In the past, practice may have occurred as a matter of course in the Christian home more than today. Regardless, the challenge presents itself to the church these days, in cooperation with family units within the congregation and possibly church auxiliary organizations, to make practice of these and other Christian-living skills available in a deliberate way. Everyone concerned cannot simply assume that someone else is providing the practice. Nor will it suffice to hope for the best that practice of these skills will come about *somehow*. Provision and coordination of practice will constitute a noteworthy challenge to post-Christendom congregations, perhaps as part of their ongoing efforts at member incorporation.

What Help Is Needed from the Synod and Districts?

Here is a place where I as a district staff member have more questions than answers. This instance concerns ways in which the broader church can support congregations as they try to cultivate quality in various aspects of their cooperative

¹⁵ These are terms from the *Every One His Witness* basic core module.

¹⁶ "Witnessing Helps," LCMS Central Illinois District, accessed June 22, 2025, <https://www.cidlcms.org/outreach-witness-ministry.html>. The four areas, it might be noted, were specifically mentioned by the LCMS in Resolution 1-01A, "To Stimulate Training for Witness," in *Proceedings of the 2023 (68th) LCMS Convention* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2023), 115.

endeavors. How can the synod and districts be of help to member churches in this regard?

Working *in support of* congregations is, broadly speaking, one of the two basic things that the synod and districts do. The other is to carry out work *on behalf of* member congregations.¹⁷

As resources dwindle, some churches and pastors might look at their districts and say, “It would not be the worst thing if staff size there were cut back. We do not use the services they provide to support us. Why should we be paying for them?” I can point to my own case as an example. From 2017 to 2025, I was approached to do stewardship consultations with only two congregations. I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of *Every One His Witness* core workshops I have led. Services to congregations are not in high demand, at least not these services.

Some pastors have told me, “I’m not likely to call you in. I have the responsibility to teach my people.” They have a point. To a great extent, I shared their attitude for the nineteen years I spent as a parish pastor, and I still respect it. However, this attitude can run to extremes that seem rather shortsighted and impractical. Short-sighted since, in the majority of our churches, all the teaching is then funneled through the capabilities and the time of one pastor—and quite possibly an overextended pastor, at that. The congregation may need a broader range of teaching, though, sometimes in specialized areas. The attitude can turn out to be impractical because according to it, strictly construed, a pastor should not encourage his people to read *Portals of Prayer* or *The Lutheran Witness* unless he had written every word in a particular issue himself.

Also, viewing district activity strictly in terms of its service *to* member congregations can lose sight of the services that a district carries out *on behalf of* these churches, such as support for new church starts or campus ministries. Further, it says nothing about the district’s remittances to the national synod, and what these funds enable the synod to do on behalf of congregations, such as providing doctrinal supervision and a doctrinal review process.

For the moment, however, let us keep the focus on what the synod and districts offer in support of congregations, and to help congregations do things with quality. Just what should that support be? How much and how best for the synod to try to help congregations and pastors?

A bit of Missouri Synod history may prove helpful. By 1953, a year when the synod was starting new churches with amazing rapidity, misgivings had arisen because the many new congregations could have occasioned the formation of a number of new districts. Concerns arose about the monetary costs involved in district proliferation, and also about more consequential costs such as making doctrinal

¹⁷ Bylaw 1.1.1 (a) and (b), in *2023 Handbook: Constitution, Bylaws, and Articles of Incorporation* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2023), 21.

oversight “almost impossible,” and threatening the synod’s unity. The 1953 synod convention assigned this entire subject to the Council of Presidents (then called the College of Presidents) for study.¹⁸

While the resulting recommendation to the 1956 convention did not close the door to forming new districts—in fact, a few new districts were created over the next decade—it did suggest steps for an existing district to take before spinning off a new one. One of these was, “Offer more specialized leadership on the District level.”¹⁹ Larger districts could offer specialized leadership in an array of parish service areas.

Here was an incentive for a church to remain with its district even as that district kept growing as more and more new congregations were added: in the increased-size district, any congregation could benefit from specialized leadership that a small district would find difficult to provide. Thus, by staying with its district, a church could receive parish services in unprecedented supply. The synod passed a resolution directing congregations to this incentive.²⁰ By 1969, when the synod adopted a set of principles to judge the viability of new or realigned districts, the first principle was that the district “offers adequate parish services.”²¹ Provision of parish services at the district level had become a routine expectation.

It should be noted that the demand for parish services in the 1950s was hardly artificial. Before 1953 and 1956, a new hunger for parish services was already being felt within the synod, specifically a desire for various kinds of workshops. In 1949, Herman Gockel observed, “The past few years have witnessed a marked increase in the popularity of workshops, seminars, and forums of one type or another. While it is true that the interest in such meetings was originally primed by several of our national boards and agencies, it is also true that, once the idea had taken hold, there was a growing demand for more and more such meetings.”²²

Still, at least part of the impetus for districts to offer more specialized leadership came not for the sake of the parish services themselves but as a means toward another end. It was addressing the potential for the synod to amass what many regarded as an unhealthily large number of districts.

¹⁸ Resolution 28, “Reconsider Former Memorial re Creation of New Districts,” in *Proceedings of the Forty-Second Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, 1953 (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1953), 469–470.

¹⁹ Resolution 42, “Creation of New Districts in Synod,” in *Proceedings of the Forty-Third Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, 1956 (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1956), 487 (hereafter cited as 1956 Proceedings).

²⁰ Resolution 42, 1956 Proceedings, 488.

²¹ Resolution 4-03, “To Establish General Principles for Formation or Realignment of Districts,” in *Proceedings of the Forty-Eighth Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, 1969 (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1969), 102.

²² Herman Gockel, “Through the Editor’s Window: Why the Demand for Workshops?,” *To-day: A Journal of Practical Missionary Procedure* 4, no. 6 (August 1949): 17.

Today we still face the question of whether churches and pastors need all the parish services offered by the synod and its districts. From some seventy years after the conventions of the mid-1950s, a plethora of resources can be found online alone. Some of these come from the synod or its auxiliaries, and the internet carries a plethora of material from many other sources. Moreover, pastors and congregations have forged communication links with other pastors and congregations in ways unimagined seventy years ago, so they can readily share information and recommendations back and forth between themselves. In this environment, the question renews itself: how much and how best can the synod and districts help congregations and pastors?

This is the point at which I find myself with more questions than answers. Is less help needed from the synod these days? Or is the help now needed of some new sort?

Congregations are in a better position to know what they need than anyone else. Still, they might confuse what they *need* with what they *want*, really focusing on wants although they may think they have needs in view. Do they genuinely need more than they consciously want? Might a congregation truly need evangelism training, for example, yet remain unconcerned if that training never comes to them because no one there especially wants it? How best to sort out such confusion between needs and wants?

The synod consists of congregations in God-given church fellowship who have voluntarily joined with one another to do things better together than trying them separately. It is not far fetched to think that the synod and its districts can play a part in cultivating quality endeavors by pastors and congregations. These days, precisely what should that part be? Limitations on time and resources lend some urgency to the question. If only for the sake of exercising good stewardship of time and resources, it begs for an answer.

I myself remain open to the prospect that Missouri Synod congregations and pastors do not need all the help that district staff people like me are trying to give them, help that districts may in some cases be required by their bylaws to offer. However, I would find it very hard to believe that there is nothing at all for the synod or districts to do for them in parish services.

Conclusion

Scripture presents us with the examples of saints of old who worked for the Lord and did it well. Just a few examples: Joseph, the food administrator in Egypt; Daniel, not only the prophet but also the civil servant; Nehemiah, the faithful layman determined to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem; and Paul, the great theologian and missionary. "I worked harder than any of them," Paul wrote of the other apostles, "though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Cor 15:10 ESV).

Like us, these men were not perfect; they were sinners. Like them, as saints covered by the blood of Christ, Christians today can set about doing the Lord's work well also in our churches, according to our callings. We do it for him.