

21st Century Pastors Address Congregational Health

Addressing Congregational Health in 21st Century Issues

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[Symposium on Congregational Health
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, September 21, 2009]

This paper could be just a few sentences: “The enemy of congregational health is always sin, so the solution will always be Jesus and His forgiving love. God gives us the blessings of Jesus’ work through the means of grace, so dig into the Word deeply, stand firm on every part, make regular use of the sacraments, and share the Word zealously with others. Any congregation which is doing that will be healthy. So, that’s it! Let’s go to afterglow!”

At the same time, which doctrine doesn’t come into play when we talk about congregational health? Can a congregation be healthy if it doesn’t understand that God is our creator, that Jesus is our redeemer, that the Holy Spirit is our sanctifier? A healthy congregation needs to understand the means of grace, the sacraments, election, that we’re the church militant, eschatology, law-gospel, God’s providence, Christian freedom, the mission of the church, separation of church and state, the priesthood of all believers, church and ministry, justification, worship, outreach, etc., etc. Theology is a *habitus practicus*; every bit of theology has application for having a healthy congregation. So, this paper could be a book!

I’m guessing you want something in between.

To complete the assignment – dealing with congregational health in the 21st Century – we need to go where angels fear to tread, into the realm of the subjective. We – thank God! – have an *objective* theology. We have the objective truth of the Word. We have objective means of grace which focus our attention on objective justification and its blessings. We have a real heaven to which we’re headed. We’re very comfortable with saying, “God says it, and that settles it.”

But how does one measure “congregational health”? Think of Galatians 5: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23 NIV). Certainly a healthy congregation will have all of those things, right? Yet, how do you measure it? While some of those things can be seen to some extent in the outward appearance, for the most part those are matters of the heart. Can you and I look into people’s hearts to see who has love, joy, peace, etc? Of course not! Can we even measure it within ourselves? Not really!

A friend who had served in a foreign mission field came back to the states. When I asked him about his ministry experience, he appeared a bit exasperated and said something like, “It was okay, but it just seemed like we never saw any fruits!” I’d guess many of us could say similar things. But do we really *know*? We don’t.

Elijah thought the church in Israel was dead. “I am the only one left,” he said (1 Ki 19:10 NIV). God, of course, knew better: “Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel” (1 Ki 19:18 NIV). Things were in tough shape, but Elijah’s opinion was inaccurate.

Similarly, at the time of Jesus, who would you have thought were the “healthy believers”? Probably the Pharisees! And yet Jesus says, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!” (Mt. 23:13a NIV) At the same time He¹ points to the tax collectors and prostitutes, describing them as entering into the kingdom of God (cf. Matthew 21:31). Not exactly the people we would have pointed to as an example of a “healthy church”! So this whole topic is difficult and subjective.

¹ I realize that “accepted style” doesn’t capitalize the pronoun. But, I think it’s more clear when the pronoun is capitalized.

And yet we've been asked to address it. What are the challenges, the opportunities? How do we do ministry in this era? We brothers will have differences of opinion. I've been asked to address current issues, and to make suggestions as to how to approach some obstacles/opportunities. I'll do that. That means that this paper will be somewhat provocative, and – yes, again – will have lots of subjectivity. That makes me nervous!

At the same time, we need to be digging into this, precisely because theology is a *habitus practicus*. We are to use the Word of God “practically,” making real applications to this life and pointing people to life eternal. Paul urges Timothy to "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15 NIV). God has blessed us with the Word; He gives us the honor of handling it. It's valuable for us to ask, “Are we doing all we can with the Word so that our members and congregations are as healthy as possible, so that the Word is reaching those who do not yet believe in Jesus?” We can ask those questions, and should, for our work is eternal.

Yet, we do so not under the gloomy clouds of guilt, but with the bright sun of God's forgiving love shining upon us. We are the children of God, baptized into His name, fed with the Word and the Supper. Confident of our status, we're able to take a serious look at ourselves, at our ministries, at the time in which we live, assessing our strengths and weaknesses, all the while knowing that we're on the road to life eternal. Let's dig in, shall we?

Presuppositions:

As challenging as our last synod convention was, it pales in comparison to what's going on in other church bodies, who are discussing things like, “Should we ordain homosexuals who are in a committed relationship?” Thank God that He's led our church body to be committed to the Word! What a blessing that you and I can look at each other and can presuppose that every one of us is convinced that the Bible is the Word of God. That's a miracle of God's grace.

There are some other presuppositions which are particularly important in this discussion. First, I am making the assumption that every one of us here is convinced that the gospel is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16). Thank God we presuppose that! To understand congregational health, it's IMPERATIVE that we believe that and order ministry accordingly.

Similarly, it's imperative that we understand that Baptism and the Supper are incredible gifts from God, powerful means of grace. That impacts our understanding of congregational health deeply. So while I'll not spend time addressing Baptism and the Supper *per se*, the paper is written with the proper assumption that WELS pastors understand those truths.

One truth which we'll particularly keep in mind is that we are the church militant. This is a huge difference between us and the Arminians. The Arminians make the assumption that a healthy church will be growing *numerically*: “One characteristic of healthy churches is that they grow,” says C. Peter Wagner. Consequently, “the fruit [that] the Church Growth Movement has selected as the validating criterion for discipleship is responsible church membership” (Quoted by Preus, 278). The problem is, numerical growth isn't necessarily a sign of spiritual health.

Consider John 6. At the beginning of that chapter, the church looks robust! Thousands of people are following Jesus! But then comes the “bread of life” discourse and many quit following Jesus. The church didn't look so healthy then, did it!

But the confession of faith made by that “church” at that time was wonderful: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68b-69 NIV). That's a healthy confession of faith!²

² Ironically, it's delivered by Simon Peter, who didn't always exhibit a particularly “healthy” faith!

But isn't it interesting to see what Jesus says next? "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!" (John 6:70 NIV). Even in that "healthy church" there was "cancer." Jesus was dealing with the church militant.

And, *we* are the church militant. If we expect that our congregations and our synod will be completely healthy, we're fooling ourselves and rebelling against what God says.

But that doesn't give us an excuse to be unfaithful. That doesn't give us the excuse to fail to ask ourselves tough questions, to ask if we're being as faithful and aggressive with the Word of God as we should. To say, "Jesus said we would be a little flock, so I'm satisfied with that and am not going to work to reach out with the Word" is to rebel against Jesus' directive to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19 NIV). Indeed, our goal IS to grow, for God has told us that He wants "all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1Timothy 2:4 NIV). We WANT to grow. It's vital that we make every effort to grow!

But sometimes we won't. Sometimes we'll even shrink. We're the church militant.

If we're not growing (or are even shrinking) because of unfaithfulness, because of shoddy handling of the Word, then we need to repent! And change! If we're not growing (or are shrinking) because we – in a loving, winsome, yet firm way – have stood on a truth of the Word, that's part of being the church militant.

Since the church-on-earth is always the church militant, the things we need to address are in a sense no different than the issues which the church has always addressed. People were sinners in the Old Testament days, in Jesus' day, and now. There's nothing new under the sun (Ecc. 1:9).

And yet we live in a specific time, in a specific place. God planned that before the world was created (cf. Ephesians 1; Acts 17:26). So, what specific issues are in front of us today?

The 21st Century:

I'm not a sociologist, I'm a pastor. I don't think you'll have any problem recognizing that! I did a bit of research on trends in the 21st Century; perhaps we may find some interesting information which will help us to address congregational health.

There are some things about the 21st century that we probably all sort of "get," and one of those is that the world has become smaller. My wife grew up in Johnson, MN, farm country, population 38. One of her parents' best friends owns a good-sized dairy farm. Their head man is ... Hispanic. Yep, in Johnson, MN.

I live in Johnson City, TN. (Yes, I took my wife from "Johnson" to "Johnson City.") Population? C. 55,000. When I moved to Johnson City, I saw no Hispanics. Now, I see Hispanics often. The Hispanic population in our country is growing. Some data:

46.9 million: The estimated Hispanic population of the United States as of July 1, 2008, making people of Hispanic origin the nation's largest ethnic or race minority. Hispanics constituted 15% of the nation's total population. (From the U.S. Census Bureau - <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/hhmcensus1.html>)

In 1990 there were 22,354,059 Hispanics in the US.³ So, over the course of not quite 20 years, the Hispanic population in our country has more than doubled. How will we reach them?

Now let's go a different direction. Check out these statistics from the 2008 ARIS, the American Religious Identification Survey.

3 http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/QTable?_bm=y&-qr_name=DEC_1990_STF1_QTP1E&-geo_id=01000US&-ds_name=DEC_1990_STF1_&-_lang=en&-format=&-CONTEXT=qt

Religious Self-Identification of the U.S. Adult Population 1990, 2001, 2008⁴						
	1990		2000		2008	
	Number of people	Estimated %	Number of people	Estimated %	Number of people	Estimated %
Catholic	46,004,000	26.2	50,873,000	24.5	57,199,000	25.1
Other Christian	105,221,000	60.0	108,641,000	52.2	116,203,000	50.9
Other Religions	5,853,000	3.3	7,740,000	3.7	8,796,000	3.9
Nones	14,331,000	8.2	29,481,000	14.1	34,169,000	15.0
DK/Refused	4,031,000	2.3	11,246,000	5.4	11,815,000	5.2

In their summation, the researchers comment,

The American population self-identifies as predominantly Christian but Americans are slowly becoming less Christian.

- 86% of American adults identified as Christians in 1990 and 76% in 2008.
- The historic Mainline churches and denominations have experienced the steepest declines while the non-denominational Christian identity has been trending upward particularly since 2001.
- The challenge to Christianity in the U.S. does not come from other religions but rather from a rejection of all forms of organized religion (p1).

Did you notice how many people identified as “nones” or “dk/refused? Those numbers have more than doubled! Later in the survey we see the numbers concerning how many people identify themselves as non-denominational. That number’s going up! From 1990 to 2008 the numbers have gone from 546,000 (0.3% of the population) to 2,154,000 (0.9% of the population) (Page 5). Yes, that’s still a relatively small number, but that’s some big growth!

How about Lutherans? That survey (p5) states that the number of self-professed Lutherans fell from 9,110,000 (5.2% of the population) to 8,674,000 (3.8% of the population) from 1990 to 2008. Wow. The overall population was growing; Lutheranism is shrinking.

And, of course, there’s the growth of non-Christian religions in America, particularly, the growth of people who claim to be Muslim. How many Muslims are there? Good question! Estimates range from approximately 1.35 million (the ARIS, 5) to 8 million:

- By one estimate, there are about 6 million Muslims in America. That would put the U.S. at No. 34 in the world.
- By another measure, the Muslim population may be closer to 4.1 million -- No. 41 globally.
- And if you rank nations in terms of the percentages of their populations that are Muslims, NationMaster says the U.S. comes in at No. 115.
- The Census Bureau, not surprisingly, adds some perspective of its own: It says just 0.6% of the nation's adult population is Muslim.
- The picture doesn't really change if you take the largest estimate we've found today. The non-profit Islamic Information Center puts the U.S. Muslim population at 8 million. (http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2009/06/us_is_one_of_the_largest_musli.html)

4 <http://prog.trincoll.edu/ISSSC/DataArchive/index.asp>. The chart is found on p3 of that report.

The same ARIS survey shows that only 66% of our population expects to have a “religious funeral or service” when they die. 27% said “no,” and another 7% said they didn’t know or they refused to answer (10).

An interesting quote: “If the Hispanic population, which is the mostly Catholic, had not expanded then the Catholic population share nationally would have significantly eroded. One feature of the white population today is in fact the large number of ex-Catholics, who are now found among the ‘Nones’ ...” (ARIS, 17). Again, how can we reach those people?

Another aspect of our culture that we “get” without having to do much research is the impact of the internet. It’s everywhere! One quick story:

In September 2008 we held the opening service for Living Promise Lutheran, a church we’re daughtering in Morristown, TN. We had done several large mailings (10,000 homes, 3 times), ran newspaper ads, passed out flyers door-to-door, etc. In addition to our core group, we were blessed with 8 first-time visitors at the opening service. Every one of them said they checked out our website before coming. Every one. And Morristown is not a high-tech community.

Another mark of the 21st Century is that it’s highly subjective, kind of like the time of the Judges (cf. Judges 17:6 et.al.). The Barna Group did some research to that point:

By a three to one margin (71% to 26%) adults noted that they are personally more likely to develop their own set of religious beliefs than to accept a comprehensive set of beliefs taught by a particular church. Although born again Christians were among the segments least likely to adopt the a la carte approach to beliefs, a considerable majority even of born again adults (61%) has taken that route. Leading the charge in the move to customize one’s package of beliefs are people under the age of 25, among whom more than four out of five (82%) said they develop their own combination of beliefs ...

... Among individuals who describe themselves as Christian, for instance, close to half believe that Satan does not exist, one-third contend that Jesus sinned while He was on earth, two-fifths say they do not have a responsibility to share the Christian faith with others, and one-quarter dismiss the idea that the Bible is accurate in all of the principles it teaches (www.barna.org, January 12, 2009).

That’s subjective. And subjectivity is everywhere. Sean Hannity gave this quote regarding the economy: “What we really need is for people to feel better” (Sean Hannity show, 12/31/08.). I’ve somehow been added to the email list for the ELCA and LC-MS churches in NE Tennessee and SW Virginia. In one email, dated May 14, 2009, it said this:

I have just spoken with (name omitted). He is eager to host us. He has in his hands a paper about mission. The paper makes the point that the church is in chaos and we must go to the chaos in order to hear God's call and in order to hear each other. This paper sounds helpful.

After reading the email, I thought of some other adverbs which might describe that paper; “helpful” wasn’t one of them!

But subjectivity is reality in our nation. People are quick to say “I think, I feel.” In the same Barna Report from which we earlier quoted, George Barna comments:

Faith, of whatever variety, is increasingly viral rather than pedagogical. With people spending less time reading the Bible, and becoming less engaged in activities that deepen their biblical literacy, faith views are more often adopted on the basis of dialogue, self-reflection, and observation than teaching. Feelings and emotions now play a significant role in the development

of people's faith views - in many cases, much more significant than information-based exercises such as listening to preaching and participating in Bible study.

Lack of Biblical literacy impacts our culture. I read one humorous example in *Soul Tsumani*:

The pastoral team at Trinity Church in Columbus, Ohio, "retreated" to Indianapolis for the NCAA "March Madness" basketball playoffs. The ubiquitous guy with orange hair and homemade "John 3:16" sign was under the basket at the other end of the court. Seated directly behind the pastoral team were two well-dressed couples debating what the "John 3:16" sign meant. Reduced to guessing, one thought it must be an ad for a new restaurant in town. The others dissed that idea since "who would send someone out with orange hair and a hand-drawn sign to advertise anything?" Another thought the "John 3:16" sign might be a signal to someone to meet at the john on the third floor, stall 16. Talk about clueless. They were totally in the dark why anyone would be holding a sign with those words on it. (Sweet, 45)

In that same book, Sweet writes, "Skeptical of institutions, postmoderns are getting spiritual help from videos, books, radio, newsletters, and a host of do-it-yourself sources. People may be 'high on God,' but they are 'low on church'" (47).

The nonchurch culture has expectations about what the church ought to be. McNeal writes,

They do not automatically think of the church as championing the cause of poor people or healing the sick or serving people. These are things they associate with Jesus. People outside the church see the handling of the sexual abuse scandals by the Catholic Church as an indictment on the church as a whole. They believe the church is out for itself, looking out more for the institution than for people. (12)

Now, you and I would look at McNeal's quote and correctly say, "Of course that's what the unbeliever thinks that the church should be doing, because of the opinio legis! But that doesn't mean it's what the church *should* be doing." True. We simply point these things out so that we can be aware of the culture in which we live.

We could explore much more: the impact of evolutionary thought on our culture, the easy availability of illegal drugs, the increasingly immoral society, etc.

But I'll touch on just one more: the continuing break-down of the family. A lengthy study for the Center for Disease Control addressed the number of women who had cohabited. Studying 60,201 women ages 15-44, it found that 41% of those women had cohabited at one time or another. Among those ages 25-39 the percentage jumps to well over 50% (Bramlett, 10).

Of course, family break-down has lots of negative impacts:

Even when the mother does remarry, studies suggest that children in stepfamilies have similar risks of adverse outcomes as children in single-parent families: both groups of children do worse than children living with two biological parents in terms of academic achievement, depression, and behavior problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, premarital sexual intercourse, and being arrested. (Bramlett, 4)

Perhaps some of the most disturbing stats in that survey are those concerning how many women divorce, then later cohabitate.

Women with no religious affiliation are the most likely to have cohabited after marriage (86 percent within 10 years), and women affiliated with fundamentalist Protestant faiths are the least

likely (56 percent within 10 years, table 29). . . . For women whose religion is very important, the probability of cohabitation after marriage is 62 percent within 10 years, compared with 77 percent of those for whom religion is not important. (20)

Wow! For those whose religion is “very important,” the probability that they will move in with someone is 62%!

And by the way – that study was done in 1995. Anyone want to bet that those numbers have gone down?!? Yeah, I’m not taking that bet, either.⁵

So why spend pages talking about what the 21st century culture is like? Why is it important for us to know these things?

Because it’s our honor to share the Word of God with these people, in this culture. We need to know this culture. We can’t assume that people know that it’s wrong to live together outside of marriage. We can’t assume that people know anything about the Word of God. A sermon peppered with unexplained Bible History allusions or theological jargon like “justification” may be completely accurate, could correctly divide law and Gospel, etc., but it will likely have a hard time communicating to many of our first-time visitors. (And if that’s the case, then *we’ve* become the obstacle to the gospel.) We can’t assume the unchurched/unbelievers have a positive opinion about the church. Our statement that we have objective truth will sound funny to many. That we have objective truth is good news! We need to proclaim it with confidence and joy! But we also need to realize that it’s different than what people expect, and most will at first be skeptical if not downright hostile, simply from a cultural point of view.⁶

While we may not like much of what we find in our culture, it’s the culture in which we and our people live. If we’re to have healthy congregations in this century, we need to have some grasp on these things so that we’re able to bring law and gospel to bear on all of it.⁷

What about the WELS? Are we a healthy church?

Previous to writing this paper I put out a survey concerning congregational health in the WELS, asking the district presidents to send it to at least 50 pastors in their districts. (My thanks to them!) 192 people responded. I had no way to track the respondents, so I don’t know from where they came. However, 192 respondents – more than 10% of our active pastors – would seem to be a pretty good sampling.⁸

Question #1 had three parts to it:

On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the best and 1 being the worst, rate the following:												
Answer Options	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Rating Average	Response Count
Overall spiritual health of your own congregation	0	2	11	23	28	40	53	27	8	0	6.08	192
Overall spiritual health of our synod	0	4	12	21	46	63	27	12	6	1	5.65	192

⁵ For some more up-to-date statistics, from a group which supports living together outside of marriage, check out the “Alternatives to Marriage Project.” <http://www.unmarried.org/statistics.html>

⁶ Of course, we’d expect that hostility: Romans 8:7.

⁷ If while you were reading this segment you were thinking, “Man! Where is he going? This is all over the board!”, welcome to the 21st Century! That’s the way many in the 21st Century think; there’s not much consistency in their lives. So the person in your pew – particularly the first-time visitor – will likely think that way.

⁸ Again, I’m a pastor, not a sociologist. I have no clue as to how surveys are to be weighted, how the ordering of the questions can affect the outcomes, etc. So I don’t offer this as “scientific proof,” simply as offering some insights.

Your ability to lead your congregation to health	3	2	5	13	29	37	50	32	17	4	6.46	192
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It would seem that we in general feel that our health is about average. Interestingly, we feel slightly better about the health of our individual congregations than we do about the overall health of our synod. And overall, we seem to be confident – but not cocky – about our ability to lead our own congregations to spiritual health.

Question #2:

Mark the three which you consider to be the top three biggest hindrances/threats to congregational health today.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
The breakdown of the family.	46.4%	89
The number of people in Bible Study.	57.8%	111
The number of people in worship.	33.9%	65
The immorality of society.	18.2%	35
Lack of male leadership in congregations.	22.9%	44
Lack of vision in our synodical leadership.	2.1%	4
Lack of vision in our lay leadership.	6.3%	12
Lack of vision amongst our pastorate.	7.8%	15
The subjectivity of the American culture.	20.8%	40
Lack of doctrinal depth in our pastorate.	1.6%	3
Lack of doctrinal depth amongst our laity.	16.7%	32
Pastoral laziness.	6.3%	12
Lack of personal Bible reading by the laity and called workers.	42.2%	81
Other (Please name/describe)	17.2%	33

The top three responses:

1. The number of people in Bible Study.
2. The breakdown of the family.
3. Lack of personal Bible reading by the laity and called workers.

The number of people in worship also ranked pretty high, yet the response numbers on “the number of people in Bible study” were almost twice as high as the worship numbers.

I’d guess that none of us would say we’re satisfied with our worship numbers, but I do find it striking that Bible study so strongly outnumbers worship. I wonder what these responses would have looked like if the survey had been given 25 years ago?

Under the “other,” one fourth of the comments mentioned further “breakdown of the family” type things: lack of priorities, too much focus on sports, overall “busy-ness,” materialism. One comment: “even with the family intact - our parents struggle to be the spiritual influence they have been called to be.”⁹

Question #3

Mark three things which you think are most important for building a healthy congregation.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Offering more opportunities to partake of the Lord’s Supper.	7.3%	14
Doing regular and aggressive outreach work.	20.3%	39

⁹ The complete answers to this – and the rest of the questions on the survey – will be found on the addenda when the papers are posted on the Seminary website.

Mark three things which you think are most important for building a healthy congregation.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Encouraging different forms of worship.	1.6%	3
Getting more people into Bible study.	80.7%	155
Teaching stewardship regularly.	8.9%	17
Teaching the mission of the church to congregations.	25.5%	49
Getting more people into worship.	39.1%	75
Getting more people to read their Bible at home.	48.4%	93
Having the pastor make regular home visits to members.	32.8%	63
Offering many opportunities for members to make use of their gifts to do word-of-God ministry.	22.9%	44
Other (Please name/describe)	12.5%	24

The results here are consistent with the results from Question #2. Getting more people into Bible study was far and away the #1 answer, with “getting more people to read their Bible at home” #2. Worship came in third. We see several others with fairly strong numbers: doing outreach work, teaching the mission of the church, pastoral visits to the members, and offering opportunities for members to do word-of-God ministry all had strong support. Under the “other” segment a couple of things got several mentions: the importance of good preaching, the value of pastoral visits to both members and prospects, and excellence – along with variety – in liturgical worship. Interestingly, only 3 people marked “encouraging different forms of worship” as a key to building congregational health.

Question #4: “If I want a congregation to become more healthy, I would start by...”

As you can imagine, there were a variety of answers, but the one consistent theme which emerged won't surprise you – again and again our men emphasized the importance of getting people into the Word. Here's a sample, the un-edited comments on the first 12 which came in:

- “Trying to get more people in Bible study.”
- “focusing on the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament and do all I could to help people stay or become exposed to them.”
- “getting more people into God's Word.”
- “Getting people to Biblically evaluate their commitment to their congregation.”
- “modeling health through study of his Word.”
- “use every means possible to bring means of grace to congregation members”
- “having people use the Means of Grace more frequently”
- “Visiting every family and encouraging them with the gospel to pursue spiritual growth.”
- “getting lay leaders into regular Bible study”
- “A Bible study on the mission of the church focused on equipping them for it and then giving them meaningful ministry to do it. The two areas I would focus on would be equipping them for informal witnessing (with accountability groups) and lay teachers/shepherds.”
- “working on my own spiritual health, the spiritual health of my family and then the spiritual health of the families of my congregation (in their home). By the way - I like a lot of the thoughts in Christian Schwarz's "Natural Church Development"”
- “sharing the Means of Grace with them more often.”

Question #5: “The two things that most worry me about our spiritual health as a synod are ...”

Again, the answers varied, but a number of themes emerged:

- The number of people in Bible study and/or home devotions.
- The seeming reliance of some on methodology rather than trusting the means of grace.

- Seeming spiritual apathy amongst our laity.
- Poor preaching. (One commented that some pastors spend ½ a work week developing a boring sermon!)
- Lack of resources, particularly financial.
- Too much focus on budget matters.
- The possible loss of a prep school and/or watering down of our worker-training system.
- Lack of trust among the brothers, and lack of togetherness, as perhaps seen in the “Issues in the WELS” vs. “Church and Change.”
- Legalism, both on the side of those who seem to intimate that you must worship using a hymnal order vs. those who seem to intimate that you must do contemporary worship.
- Lack of zeal for the lost.

One answer which I particularly appreciated: “slanted questionnaire (sic) like these.” Guess I know what he thought of my questionnaire, but I appreciate that he filled it out!

Question #6 (the final question): "The two things which give me the most confidence about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

One major theme emerged: the truths concerning God Himself, that He’s given us promises to bless us, that we have the Word of God, the means of grace, and that we’re committed to them and to standing firm on the truths of the Word! Those thoughts were far and away most widely mentioned. Other minor themes:

- Committed lay leaders.
- The strong worker training system.
- Desire to do outreach work both at home and abroad.
- Strong group of young pastors.
- Pres. Schroeder.
- Decisions of the recent synod conventions to re-affirm our synodical commitment to worker-training and missions.
- Continued commitment to Greek and Hebrew in our worker training.

One person’s answer to what gave him the most confidence about our synod’s spiritual health was “Tom Kock.” But then he immediately explained: “OK - just wanted to get a smile”. You got one!

What can we conclude from the survey? It strikes me that on the good-news side, we have an appreciation for the Word of God, the efficacy of the means of grace, an understanding that only the Word works. What a blessing! Where those things are in place, there is a solid foundation on which to build. Walther commented that the 1st prayer of the church was always to be “Hallowed be thy name,” not “thy kingdom come.”¹⁰ His point? Since God works only through Word and Sacrament, it’s imperative that we hold tightly to the Word and Sacraments. If we do so, we can’t help but desire to share those things, because holding to the truth and sharing the truth are intrinsically tied together. Thank God that He’s blessed us to have intellectual understanding of those truths!

But as always, we look not only at the “doctrine,” but also at the “practice.” While we claim to have a deep regard for the efficacy of the Word and Sacraments, while we claim to have a desire to share it, does our practice “square” with our doctrine? Let’s consider several synod statistics.

¹⁰ Walther’s comments were made in a sermon at the synodical conference. It’s quoted in the senior year dogmatics notes, p153. I gave you the English translation instead of the original German.

We recently finished the Year of Jubilee offering. Thank God for the many special gifts! Yet more than 1/3 of our congregations didn't participate. (37% according to the final report email distributed by my district president, John Guse.) The Scriptures clearly teach that the Word of God is powerful. We say that we believe that. Did we? Did we trust that God could/would motivate the hearts of our people to support His work both in our local congregations and as a synod? Or did we not? That needs to be asked, and answered honestly.

Similarly, we thank God for our commitment to stand on all of the Word of God, to not pick and choose doctrines like some sort of spiritual buffet. We say that we're committed to teaching God's truths, all of them. Are we doing so?

Let's consider some statistics from our parish services office. The parish consultants have a tool which they use to assess congregational beliefs. It has sixteen doctrinal questions. They've kept track of the responses from the congregations which they've served. What follows are several of the questions and the average responses to the questions. (My thanks to them for sharing this info with me; they asked me only to use parts of it.)

Question	Agree	Disagree
1. Determining whether something is right or wrong depends on the situation.	61%	39%
2. The main emphasis of the Gospel is on God's rules for right living.	59%	41%
3. Justification is the Bible's word for the truth that God guides us by his Holy Spirit.	79%	21%
4. The major religions of the world all lead to the same God.	34%	66%
5. Stewardship means that everything belongs to God and we manage things according to his principles.	87%	13%
6. People who don't recognize Jesus as their Savior from sin will spend eternity in hell.	79%	21%

Again, I'm sure it's not "scientific." We could argue with the wording of some of the questions. And I've removed most of the questions on which we did well (i.e. 94% appropriately answered a question regarding verbal inspiration.) But it gives us some food for thought.

For those of us who wonder if our people have been impacted by the subjective world, question #1 speaks clearly, as the majority agree with the situational ethics statement. If we're wondering if we can still simply refer to "the gospel" and "justification" and thereby have actually preached the gospel, not so. According to the stats above, when we speak those words the majority of our people actually hear "law"! Probably most disturbing are #4 and #6. I would hope those answers would make all of us say, "Wow! We have work to do!"

Ironically, one of the questions which was quite well answered was the one on stewardship. I've heard stated by some that we've failed to do a good job of teaching stewardship. I wonder. It would appear to me that we've done a pretty good job of teaching stewardship, but have not done as good a job in teaching salvation! If our people aren't clear that Jesus is the only way to heaven, that there's only one true God, then why in the world would they want to give of their treasures to support the work of spreading His Word? Is it possible that we need to be doing a more clear, winsome, passionate job of proclaiming salvation truths and that the earthly treasures will follow? Certainly Jesus' words "You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (Matthew 23:23b NIV) apply.

A couple of anecdotes. While on vacation this summer, I attended a WELS church in the Midwest. I heard zero gospel in the sermon. The pastor told me twice – very clearly – that *he* loved me; he never told me once that *Jesus* loved me. Similarly, while at district pastor/teacher conference several years ago, of the devotions which were given, exactly one had gospel in it. The others had no gospel whatsoever. (If my memory serves me correctly, there were four devotions, possibly five.)

Now, I understand that every one of us pastors will have a "whiff" Sunday when we just blow it. I get that. But at district conference, where you're preaching to your peers? Does it not make sense that most of us would want to do our best? Sure! So if the "best" had no gospel, then what's happening at our congregations? Obviously my prayer is that all of those are isolated incidents. Regardless, we need to be checking ourselves on those things. Our task is too important to not do so.

Perhaps the thoughts just explored help us to understand the following statistics, concerning adult confirmations and/or professions of faith: (Thanks to Evangelism Administrator Mike Hintz for digging out those statistics!)

Year	No A/C or PoF	One A/C or PoF	Total
2004	325	132	457 (out of 1261 congregations)
2005	301	158	459 (out of 1263 congregations)
2006	291	134	425 (out of 1276 congregations)
2007	326	172	498 (out of 1276 congregations)
2008	363	153	516 (out of 1286 congregations)

Wow! That's disheartening! We SAY we're committed to using the means of grace in both inreach and outreach. Are we? Instead of boldly, widely, energetically proclaiming the truths we hold so dear, have we hidden behind a "cloak of orthodoxy"? God challenged the church in Sardis this way: "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God" (Rev 3:2 NIV). Would God say the same to us?

Now we will quickly remind ourselves that the Spirit blows where He wills (cf. John 3:8). Yes, congregations using the Word aggressively will sometimes experience no numerical growth.¹¹

And yet the consistent synodical numbers force us to ask, "Are we really reaching out with the Word, or not?" Have we lapsed into the thinking that, "I'll just preach the gospel, that's all I can do" without giving any thought that we might be missing opportunities or that the methodology we use to proclaim that gospel could be standing as an obstacle to it?

My vicar and I were discussing that point, talking about how the gospel is efficacious, but that we could become obstacles. I asked, "Vicar, we could have our only worship opportunity at 3:00 am. How many people would you expect to show up?" "Not many." "Yep! The gospel would still be efficacious, powerful, but by our methodology we would stand as an obstacle to it!"

Have we done that with the gospel? Have we become obstacles to it, by failing to proclaim it clearly, or by failing to reflect God's caring love, or by failing to aggressively share it? Do our current financial challenges come not so much because of economic circumstances but because we've failed to own the mission of the church, that is, that we've failed to thoroughly ground our people in the Word, and as a result have also failed to share the Word aggressively? Have we – because of laziness or unfaithfulness – failed to see and to seize the opportunities to put the means of grace to work? Have we sat at our computers when we should have been in people's homes? Have we criticized someone else's ministry, when our own opportunities to share the Word didn't get done? If so, how dare we! We claim to stand firm on the Word! How possibly could we not put its truths – to grow in and go with the Word – into practice?

Once again, it's imperative that we ask those questions and answer them humbly and honestly. Where we discover sin, we go to the cross to hear Jesus' words of assurance, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Our sins are forgiven! We're the baptized children of God! What amazing grace God has poured out upon us! Living under that umbrella of forgiveness allows us – indeed compels us – to examine our faithfulness with the Word, both in standing firmly on it and in sharing it with others.

So is the WELS a healthy church body? In some ways, no, we're not. We have some terrible weaknesses. Since we are the church militant, it can be no other way! We will constantly need to be looking at ourselves, examining our activities, our faithfulness, because we're sinners.

But in other ways, absolutely we're healthy! We DO have the full truths of the Word. We DO have the means of grace, the powerful Word, the beauties of baptism, the glorious Supper! Most importantly, we have a

¹¹ My congregation – which began in 1992 with c. 20 members and has grown to over 250 souls, mostly by adult confirmations – had one year when we had zero adult confirmations. We were doing the same things we'd always done, but the Spirit said, "Not this year."

gracious, faithful, powerful God who loves us dearly and has promised to rule all things for the good of the Church (Eph. 1:22-23). We have much upon which to build! How do we build on some of our strengths? How do we address some of our weaknesses? Let's first take a look at what some of the "experts" say.

What "They" Say

There are dozens of books about church health, most written from an Arminian perspective. I felt I owed it to y'all to read several of those, but you need to know that I have a really hard time reading the Arminians. There is so much false doctrine – some blatant, some more subtle – that I just get mad. Being from the Bible belt has shaped me; I've seen the horrible damage which Arminianism does to people. So I end up not being able to get much value out of the Arminians.

Now let's balance. We trust that the Arminians are part of the Holy Christian Church: they claim to believe in Jesus, they use the Word.

They do have some things to say which are accurate and helpful. They do lots of research, both in regards to the culture in which we live, and in regards to trends in churches. We can learn from that. They've done lots of research in regards to how different sized churches "work," or when churches might need to add staff, etc. Yes, we can learn some things from them.

But when push comes to shove, "they have a different spirit."

So, let me summarize what the Arminians have to say about being a healthy church: "If the pastor has a vision and is creative and communicates the vision a lot and works really hard at it, then the church will be healthy." Ugh. Noticeably absent from their books on church health: Jesus, forgiveness, the Word, the Sacraments. Instead, everything is about "you."

And, it makes sense that it would be so popular. As Walther said, "We are all naturally more accessible to the shining and dazzling light of human reason than to the divine truth" (Law and Gospel, 20). Arminianism's appeal is finally to the *opinio legis*, and we sinful humans, in our spiritual perversity, love that.

More Walther: "When you hear some sectarian preach, you may say, 'What he said was the truth,' and yet you do not feel satisfied. Here is the key for unlocking this mystery: the preacher did not rightly divide Law and Gospel, and hence everything was wrong" (Law and Gospel, 32). And that's true as you read the Arminians on church health; you'll walk away "not ... satisfied."

Here's an Arminian sampling:

"The time to save God's Dream is now. The people to save God's Dream are you. ... This is an extraordinary moment in history. God wants you to do some extraordinary things. You can do some extraordinary things. Will you? The choice is yours" (Sweet, 34).

"My previous ministry experience taught me that growing churches have vision" (McIntosh, 16).

"Growth in the church can be directly related to the new ministries. The addition of new groups, classes, and ministries normally opens the door for newcomers to find a way into a church" (Ibid, 44).¹²

More from McIntosh:

1. **Love the Lord.** How are you showing God you love him in your life and ministry?

¹² We wouldn't argue that new ministries can open up doors to more people. We would encourage congregations to look to begin new ministries. However, the ministries are the way by which we bring people into contact with the powerful Word, so that the Holy Spirit has the opportunity to do His work. In other words, we use the methods to bring people into contact with the means. For the Arminians, the method IS the means, for they have no means.

2. **Grow the people.** What process do you have in place to disciple the people in your church?
3. **Dream a big dream.** What passion do you have for the future development of your church?
4. **Lead by example.** How are you modeling God's truth to your family and ministry team?
5. **Take initiative.** Are you taking steps of faith to accomplish God's vision for you church?
6. **Take risks.** Are you willing to struggle and fail sometimes before you see signs of growth?
7. **Trust in the Lord.** Are you planting and watering, trusting God to bring in the harvest?
(71)

“He highly recommends that the vision of this size church be communicated at least once a month from the pulpit, as well as five additional ways so that the entire congregation knows what the vision is” (156).¹³

“Jesus tapped into this widespread sentiment of disillusionment with religion but hunger for God with his teaching about the kingdom of God and how people could become a part of it” (McNeal, 17).

Now, several of the above statements are fine, in and of themselves. And if these things were said in a context in which objective justification and the means of grace were accurately proclaimed, we would even feel comfortable saying some of them. (McIntosh's seven points, for example, could be *excellent* helps if given in a proper, gospel-flavored context.) The problem is, objective justification, the means of grace and the theology of the cross are noticeably absent. So, the message becomes all “you.” Or, as Walther put it, all “wrong.” Frankly – and this is probably a bit too strong, but I'll say it anyway – I think we're mostly wasting our time when we read those books.

Some might say, “But we can read those books with discernment! We've been well-trained.” I agree. I think most (all?) WELS pastors can read these books, can sift the wheat from the chaff and glean some valuable information. It's wrong for us to send up “heretic alerts” if we hear that our brother has read something Arminian. It's proper for us to trust him, for love “always trusts” (1Corinthians 13:7).

But do our people do the same sifting? In the parish assistance doctrinal survey mentioned earlier, the agree/disagree statement is made: “To become a Christian, a person must decide to ask Jesus to come into his/her heart.” That is clearly Arminian, clearly wrong.

77% of our people agreed with it. 77%! Arminianism is a huge danger for us!

One writer who might be more helpful is Waldo Werning, who's LC-MS. He will at least talk about the Means of Grace in a Lutheran manner. (I'll quote him in a positive way later.)

However, even with him you'll read quotes like these: “The fundamental feature in renewal is the knowledge that God has drawn near in His holiness, grace, mercy, and might. Renewal begins with an awareness of God's presence, a responsiveness to His Word, a sensitivity to and conviction of sin, a living in community as the body of Christ, and fruitfulness in service and witness. This involves a summons to us to be honest with God, more thorough in our response to His grace, more open to others in Christ's body, and alive in

¹³ We have no problem with congregations having a vision statement, that is, a statement of strategy as to how a congregation plans to do nurture and outreach there. And we recognize the importance of communicating it regularly/often. But for us the vision is the way we're going to *use* the means; for the Arminians, the vision, again, *is* the means. This author stays away from the term “vision” because the Arminians tend to speak of “vision” in a way which reminds us of the “immediate grace” error. We might be better to have “strategy statements” or simply “long-range plans.”

freedom from all slaveries” (27). Notice, his “fundamental feature” is anthropocentric rather than theocentric. So even here you’ll need to do some sifting.

I realize that I’ve not given much credence to the writings of some guys who are considered influential. Is that fair? I think it is, because of their theology. You may disagree.

I fear that some of us look at the Arminians with a bit of envy or guilt. We hear about their huge attendance, about how they’re doing missionary journeys and seeming to be so active. Guys, there’s a reason: their theology leads them to uncertainty, to *not* know if they’re going to heaven, so they have to try to get certainty through their works! Yes, we trust that the Holy Christian Church is there, but those believers are being robbed of at least some of the certainty which God wants them to have!¹⁴ Do we, who teach the certainty of salvation, want our ministries to be shaped by those who *don’t* teach that? I hardly think so!

Some say, “But we can take their methods and add our good Lutheran theology.” The problem is, when one makes use of a method, one often takes on the theology from whence it came.

Preus, in his book, “The Fire and the Staff” puts it this way: “Doctrine and practice are more closely related, even interdependent, than is often realized. Doctrine affects practice and practice affects doctrine. The two are so intimately woven together that when you change one, you will inevitably change the other, sometimes without realizing what has happened” (14).

While Preus overstates, (as, unfortunately, he often does in his book) his principle is correct – practice and doctrine are interrelated. An example. The worship order in most Arminian churches is geared towards one thing – getting people ready to “make their decision for Christ.” So, the service will usually begin with 15-20 minutes of singing. Then will come a “sermon,” followed by the appeal for people to “hand their lives over to the Lord.” The entire worship order has been put together to get to that point.

Men, we can’t “Lutheranize” that! And unfortunately, that’s the case with much of what comes out of heterodoxy. Yes, you can glean some things. But for overall advice on church health, I haven’t found much that’s helpful.

The good news is, we have what we need! And it’s far better than what “they” say!

Working Towards Congregational Health

“I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26–29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.” Those words were preached by Martin Luther in the second of the eight sermons which he preached after coming back to Wittenberg in 1522.

Remember the circumstances. He’s been off at the Wartburg, junker-ing. Meanwhile Karlstadt’s gone crazy. He’s abolished the mass and ditched his preacher’s robes. With no teaching beforehand he’s given the Lord’s Supper in both kinds to the laity, including putting the host into the hands of the recipients, and oh yeah – he chose Christmas as the day to do all this. Can anyone say, “Lack of pastoral judgment?”

In addition to all that, Karlstadt – along with the Zwickau prophets – have led a charge against images, so that the people have begun smashing statues, breaking stained glass, etc. It’s time for Luther to return, to a church which we can reasonably identify as “unhealthy.” Luther preached eight sermons, one a day for eight days.

So where does Luther begin? Here are portions of the first three paragraphs of the first sermon:

The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Every one must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. We can shout into another’s ears, but every one must

¹⁴ To paraphrase one of my members, who was Methodist all her life until 3 or 4 years ago, “I always said, ‘I hope I’m going to heaven.’ It wasn’t until I was a Lutheran that I could say, ‘I *know* I’m going to heaven.’” I’ve heard comments like that over and over again.

himself be prepared for the time of death, for I will not be with you then, nor you with me. Therefore every one must himself know and be armed with the chief things which concern a Christian. ...

In the first place, we must know that we are the children of wrath, and all our works, intentions, and thoughts are nothing at all. ... Such is the saying of St. Paul in Eph. 2 [:3]. ... “We are all the children of wrath.” ...

Secondly, that God has sent us his only-begotten Son that we may believe in him and that whoever trusts in him shall be free from sin and a child of God, as John declares in his first chapter, “To all who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” [John 1:12].

Luther starts ... at the beginning. He begins with the most basic truths of law and gospel, the truths of salvation.

Luther, of course, didn't stop there. Already in that first sermon he talked about love for one another, about patience with the weak, about patience in letting the Word do its thing, about Christian freedom (i.e. adiaphora). In the later sermons, Luther expands on several of those points, spending lots of time discussing images, partaking of both kinds in the Supper, eating meat, etc. Those issues were on the table at that point, and they needed to be discussed.

But he continued to come back – over and over again – to the point that the Word does its work at its time. He hammers on the truth that we need to keep teaching, preaching, studying the Word, knowing that God will do His work in His way and at His time. For example, in the second sermon we read:

However, it should be preached and taught with tongue and pen that to hold mass in such a manner is sinful, and yet no one should be dragged away from it by the hair; for it should be left to God, and his Word should be allowed to work alone, without our work or interference. Why? Because it is not in my power or hand to fashion the hearts of men as the potter molds the clay and fashion them at my pleasure [Eccclus. 33:13]. I can get no farther than their ears; their hearts I cannot reach. And since I cannot pour faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I, force any one to have faith. That is God's work alone, who causes faith to live in the heart. ... We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure.¹⁵

Thank God, we agree! We know that the Word is powerful, (Romans 1:16), know that Baptism and the Supper work (Titus 3:5, Matthew 26:26ff et. al.)! We know that while we plant and water, that it's God who causes the increase (1Corinthians 1).

Knowing that gives us the confidence to explore ideas concerning how to bring greater health to our congregations. And I repeat, these things are subjective. I'll make suggestions. With some you may agree, with others you may say, “already doing that,” and with others you may disagree. That's fine. I pray that through the suggestions given that we'll give encouragement to one another and become better enabled to share Jesus with our members and with the world.

¹⁵ That “God's good pleasure” part reminds us that we are the church militant. There will never be a time when our congregations will be perfectly healthy. And, God has promised that His Word will have different results, even in the hearts of the believers. (i.e. the parable of the sower and the seed – 30, 60, 100 times what was sown.) Additionally, God's knit the Church together as a body, so different people are going to show signs of spiritual health in different ways. That's all part of “God's good pleasure.”

Suggestion #1 – make sure that the main thing is the main thing.

If I were to give one encouragement for building a healthy church, it would be this: start with the mission of the church. Werning quotes Luther:

Luther's 1523 treatise *Concerning the Ministry* reminds us that the function of the office of the ministry has been given to all Christians, who then call a pastor into that office. These functions are enumerated: (1) to provide the ministry of the Word; (2) to baptize; (3) to consecrate and administer the sacred bread and wine; (4) to bind and loose from sin; (5) to offer the sacrifice of a holy life, praise, and thanksgiving; (6) to intercede for others; (7) to judge doctrine. (71)

Since I'm from Tennessee, I work with a definition which is a lot simpler: "God wants us to be growing in the Word and going with the Word" (i.e. nurture and outreach, Matthew 28 et. al.). Every year I spend at least two Sundays in adult Sunday School teaching the "mission of the church." In addition, we put our congregational mission statement into the service folder almost every week.¹⁶

Why study that every year? Why put the statement in the service folder every week? Because those are the things which God wants His people to be doing! He wants us growing in the Word (2Peter 3:17ff, et. al.) and going with the Word (Acts 1:6ff, et. al.). Those things focus us on the means of grace, strengthen our faith, and lead us to reach out to others.

So guess what the devil wants? The devil wants to push us away from those things! The devil doesn't want us growing in the Word, doesn't want us going with the Word. So the devil will try to push us away from making those our "main things."

Think about it. How much time in your elders' meetings (or church council) is spent actually talking about issues directly connected to the mission of the church? Yes, it's true that many aspects of church work are connected to the mission of the church, but it's also true that many of the things which eat up our time, effort, and energy are only tangentially connected, at best.

One colleague tells the following story. It was winter in Milwaukee, WI. The snow plow had hit the metal garbage cans, wrecking the covers. So, the congregation needed to either replace the lids on the cans, or buy new cans. If they were to buy new cans, they needed to decide if they were going to buy metal or plastic. So, in the elders' meeting, forty-five minutes of discussion took place as they finally determined to buy new plastic cans. (One wise guy then smirkingly asked if they needed to discuss what color the cans ought to be! ☺) Have you had meetings like that? Most of us probably have. How easily the devil can distract us!

How do we counter-act it? By regularly studying the mission of the church, keeping it in front of ourselves, and measuring our ministry against it. When an opportunity comes, we can ask, "Does this help us grow in the Word or to go with the Word?" If so, we'll do it! If an idea would hinder us from growing in the Word or going with the Word, then we won't do it! What if it's neutral (i.e. having a quilt group probably neither helps nor hinders in regards to the mission of the church.)? Well, we may do it – it may bring some other blessing/opportunity like service or fellowship – but we'll need to recognize it isn't our main focus, and we can't let it become a time-drainer. Or, even better, we might try to take that "neutral" activity and figure out a way to connect it more closely to the mission of the church. Like perhaps that quilt group starts with a 5-minute Bible study, and we encourage that group to invite non-church-members to join it. Now it's a "growing-in-the-Word and going-with-the-Word quilt group," with the mission of the church squarely in its view! But, we need to intentionally do that. If we don't do it intentionally, the "quilt group" will remain "the quilt group" and no more.

¹⁶ And by the way, we vary it. During Lent, for example, the mission statement is in the shape of a cross. During the Easter season we put it onto the stone in front of the empty tomb, etc.

Studying the mission of the church also helps a church with its “vision.” I’m not a big “vision” guy. My congregation doesn’t have a vision statement.¹⁷ I’m not against vision statements; would probably even encourage them.

But if you have the mission of the church consistently before your eyes, you’ll figure out ways to carry it out, whether you have a vision statement or not. If we know that we’re here to grow in the Word and go with the Word, we’ll look for opportunities to do those things. And guess what? Ministries will happen! God will have guided you into them using a combination of the mission-of-the-church truths, the opportunities which He’s placed before you, and the spiritual gifts which He’s given to you and your congregation.

Understanding all of that is helpful – and freeing – for us pastors. Werning says: “Paul’s message to Timothy about pastoral ministry (2 Tim. 2) does not make it a priority that Timothy should be a community leader, a hierarchical priest, or an administrator...” (108)

In other words, pastors, you don’t have to be everything! You don’t have to be the administrator/budget hawk/ueber-leader/jack of all trades. God has called you to be a *pastor*, to lead people to grow in the Word and go with the Word. Under God’s grace, you and I are prepared to do that! And as you keep the mission of the church before your eyes and before your people’s eyes, you get the chance to do that!

One last thought. Some might ask, “You study the mission of the church *every year*?” My response: “I celebrate Christmas and Easter every year, too.”

Suggestion #2 – Bible study, Bible study, Bible study

For years our main measuring stick has been worship attendance. That’s fine. However, if my survey is given any credence, our pastorate has clearly said that the key to congregational health is Bible study attendance. So, how do we increase our Bible study attendance? I’ll offer up several suggestions.

1. **Make Bible study a priority.** Duh, right? But it’s worth asking several questions: do we first invite people for Bible study? Or worship? Is Bible study at the optimum time, or does worship get the “plum” time? Would we be willing to give up part of the worship hour for some Bible study? Or not? Do we give a significant amount of our time to preparing our Bible studies, or does the sermon-prep time dwarf our Bible study prep time?¹⁸ If Bible study is really a priority, then we need to be willing to make it such!

2. **Make Bible study worth it.** I have sat in on some Bible studies which were horribly boring. That’s a tragedy! The Word of God is NOT boring! It’s the Word of the Almighty Creator, the Word of the One who loves us dearly! It’s incumbent upon us pastors to present Bible studies in a way which isn’t boring.

A reasonable way to think about it: “What you teach has to pass the ‘who cares’ test. Why should the 75-year-old who just lost his wife care about this segment of the Bible? Why should the 25-year-old who’s expecting her first child care about this segment?” Extrapolate that to the farmer, the businessman, the teen, the substance abuser, the divorcee, etc. If you and I can look at our Bible study and say, “Each of those people will see why this part of the Bible was important for them!” then we’re where we need to be!

And let’s be honest. If I’m a “boring” teacher, I need to improve. If I’m considered a good/excellent teacher, I can look to sharpen those skills, too.

¹⁷ A vision statement is meant to flesh out how a congregation plans to carry out the mission of the church in their area. While the mission of the church is the same for all of us, the approach to ministry in Johnson City, TN will in many ways be different from ministry in Johnson, MN or Los Angeles, CA. It’s valuable to plan, to strategize, with that in mind.

¹⁸ I’m *not* suggesting that we spend less time on sermon prep. I *am* asking this: in our thought process, does Bible study preparation have the same high priority as sermon-prep?

Lots could be said under this segment about using different kinds of teaching approaches (i.e. Q and A, having different types of questions, making use of break-out groups, allowing adults to self-discover, etc.), but that's a subject for another time.

3. **Offer Bible study everywhere!** Why not start every meeting with Bible study? The WELS way is to often start with a devotion (i.e. a mini-sermon, or even a full sermon). I'd suggest that people will get far more out of a Bible study than a devotion. One story.

My vicar year was great, but our church council meetings left me disturbed. The agenda – with budget numbers – would be distributed at the beginning of the meeting, then my bishop would present a devotion (i.e. a sermonette). I knew that he had worked hard on that sermonette. They were very good.

But the reality was, few of the men heard it. They picked up the agenda and started to look at the budget numbers. It drove me nuts!

Now you could say, “Your bishop shouldn't have distributed the agenda first!” Okay, that's fair. But what if we had started with a Bible study instead? If the men had needed to actually think about and wrestle with truths of the Word, how much more healthy could they have been?

And, please realize that a Bible study doesn't have to take lots of time. A Bible study can take 2 minutes (or less)!¹⁹ Simply allow one point to sink in. The Word is powerful! To use an analogy, sometimes we have Thanksgiving Dinner; sometimes we hit the drive-through. One's better, but both feed us.

Now, let's not get legalistic. If you do some things without having a Bible study, that's fine! But it might make sense to make those times the exception, not the rule.

Suggestion #3: Make your preaching excellent!

Okay, I realize I'm getting into dangerous territory here, but here's reality – some of our preaching isn't very good. (The men who did my survey hit that point a number of times, and I related a couple of anecdotes.) That's perhaps even more tragic than some of our Bible studies not being very good! After all, in 21st Century America, we're far more likely to have first-time visitors and members come to worship than come to Bible study. That means that our sermonizing needs to be excellent. Several quotes:

“The preacher must draw up a strategical plan in order to win his hearers.”

“But a preacher who has personally passed through this experience can really speak *from* the heart, and what he says will *go into* the hearts of his hearers.”

“People can tell whether his preaching comes from the heart or not.”

Any guesses as to who spoke those words? Yep, it's CFW Walther (Law and Gospel, 23-25).

Or think about the book of Acts. We're told that Paul entered the synagogue and “spoke boldly” there for three months, “arguing persuasively” about the kingdom of God (Acts 19:8). Could our sermons be described in similar terms?

Similarly, Acts 28:23: “From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.” A couple Greek terms from that segment: Εξέτιθετο means “to lay out, set forth.” Διαμαρτυρόμενος means “to testify, to bear witness.” It's used in the legal realm. It denotes someone who can and does speak from personal experience about actions in which he took part and which happened to him, or about person and relations known to him.

¹⁹ I'm not advocating that all Bible studies be 2 minutes long. Obviously, the more the better! But there are times when a 2-minute study is apropos.

Can be used to describe views or convictions of which he approves, expresses, and emphatically champions as right. Very clearly, a part of this word is witness to facts.

Again, Acts 17:2-3: “As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead.” A couple Greek terms:

Διελέξατο: aorist middle. To reason, to resolve in the mind, to teach with the method of Q and A, to give a discourse, but always with the idea of intellectual stimulus. Socrates used this word to describe the art of persuasion, Plato for the establishment of an idea by pure thought.

Παρατιθέμενο: Present participle. “to place alongside, to present evidence.” The idea is that of making a thesis statement then supporting it with evidence. One has to appeal to fact or truths in order to do this.

Καταγγέλλω: To proclaim a message, to proclaim solemnly, emphatically.²⁰

Now we recognize that we’re looking at descriptive segments, segments which aren’t specifically about preaching. True. However, does it not strike us that the people were proclaiming Jesus with energy and excellence? Would it not make sense that we would want our proclamation to be the same? Yes, the message is efficacious in and of itself. But we can become an obstacle to that message with the way we present it. The way we proclaim the message does make a difference, and our striving needs always to be towards excellence and relevance.²¹

Walther has some interesting words regarding that point in his “Pastoral Theology”:

The fourth requirement of correct preaching is that it corresponds to the special needs of the listeners. ...

If a preacher proclaims God’s Word, pure and unalloyed, for doctrine, reproof, correction, comfort, and instruction in righteousness, he can still not wash his hands in innocence if he does not mete it out according to the individual conditions of his congregation. God has instituted a personal, public preaching office so that God’s Word may be applied according to the different natures of human beings. Recognizing the special circumstances and special needs of the congregation to which God’s Word is to be presented is a major portion of ... sermon preparation. (76)

Lots more could be explored (preaching the text in the context in which the Spirit gave it; preaching gospel-empowered sanctification; proclaiming, not presenting and/or reading), but again, that’s for another day.

Suggestion #4: Turn loose the priesthood of all believers.

God’s people have new men. The new man wants to serve God, loves to serve God. Turn them loose! And turn them loose not only with “service” things (i.e. ushering, mowing, etc.), but with Word-of-God things, too.

²⁰ Other sections with similar thoughts = Acts 14:1-3; 18:25ff; 19:8; 20.

²¹ The Dogmatics notes talk about how the Word works both psychologically and supernaturally. It’s true that the Word is powerful. It’s also true that God has chosen to have the Word work in us, touching our intellect, emotion, and will. That makes it vital that our preaching/teaching be excellent, so that we don’t become obstacles to the Word’s own power!

We've done some. For years we've felt comfortable having elders make delinquent visits, we've been comfortable with our members teaching kids' Sunday School.

But how about making shut-in visits or hospital calls? How about teaching the adult Sunday School class? (Could we offer options on Sunday morning, with the pastor teaching one class, and an elder another?) The Scriptures urge us in that direction:

(2 Tim 2:2 NIV) "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others."

(Eph 4:11-13 NIV) "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, {12} to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up {13} until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

(Heb 5:12 NIV) "In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!"

(Rom 15:14 NIV) "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another."

The Romans passage is particularly interesting, since it seems likely that Paul hadn't even met many of those people. And yet, having not met some of them, he describes them as competent to instruct each other!

One of the ways to turn loose the priesthood of all believers is to mentor. Jesus spent time with the crowds, true. But He spent far more time with the disciples. And then? Then He turned them loose! Did they make some mistakes? Sure! (As do you, as do I.) The fact that Jesus was comfortable with turning loose the humans to spread the Word of God gives us confidence. We, too, can be turned loose, can turn our people loose.²²

Now some have misused the "priesthood of all believers" to say that every one should get to do what they want. Not true! Remember, what does a priest do? He serves! "You have made them to be a kingdom and priests *to serve our God*, and they will reign on the earth" (Rev 5:10 NIV, my emphasis). The priesthood of all believers teaches us that we all use our specific gifts and talents in service to God and to one another!

Werning puts it this way:

God determines through the gifts that He has given what each member's function should be. The task is to help members recognize what God has already chosen for them on the basis of the gifts given. ...

The goal is not to discover how many people can be gathered into a building or merely kept in the faith, but to equip them and bring them to maturity. They are not to be spectators, preoccupied with their own interests or entertainment, mere consumers. They are to be not only a gathered people, but also a scattered people. The divine rhythm is "gather and scatter, come and go." (66)

Preus has similar words:

²² It's reasonable to say, "Once the person starts functioning in some sort of public way for the congregation, he/she is now serving as part of the representative ministry." So some may see my suggestion being more "involve more people in the representative ministry," rather than "turn loose the priesthood of all believers."

First, the Bible never says that being part of the “royal priesthood” gives us rights. Exactly the opposite is true. By calling us “priests,” God is telling us that we will sacrifice. We might even have to carry our cross or die for our Lord. ...

Third, when priests talk about Christ, their word is as powerful as that of Christ. Some people, even Lutheran pastors, have at times said things that gave the impression that the Word of God is not powerful unless spoken by the pastor. Such an impression is profoundly dangerous. (362-364)

One of the joys – and challenges – of ministry is that we get to help our people discover their giftedness and urge them to use those gifts. In a sense, the pastor is like the football coach, who considers each member of his team, and puts each of them onto the “depth chart” in the place in which they best help the entire team. You may see something in your people which they don’t see in themselves. The opposite is true, too.

How can we help our people discover their gifts? One of the ways is to look at the way our people are functioning in the world. Yes, there’s a difference between spiritual gifts and worldly talents, but often there’s crossover.

We can’t leave this segment without a comment about the importance of the doctrine of vocation, of letting our light shine right where we are. You and I live in a world which is hurting. Many – maybe even most – have grown up not knowing real love, not knowing familial security or safety.

Jesus said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35 NIV). What a wonderful opportunity we have! As we reflect Jesus’ love, we give Jesus’ love to those who’ve never experienced real love, we give a place of safety and security to those who have known only chaos and insecurity.

How will we bring God’s good-news truths to the people who need to hear it? It strikes me that the 21st century is just like all the other centuries – the best way is for the people of God to be lights of the world, salt of the earth, (Matthew 5) so that people can see the love of Jesus in and through us.

Often seeing “fruits” from that will take time, often a long time. Particularly since many in 21st Century America don’t trust/like the church, it will take time to allow relationships to develop. We pray that God will then work through that relationship to open the door for opportunities for us to share the message of Jesus.

So, we’ll work on making our congregations a place of God’s love! We’ll emphasize to our people that they are the children of God, and therefore, a family! A world out there is hurting, looking for those very things! We have it! The priesthood of all believers is a powerful force to bring it to the world! Teach them well; turn them loose!

Suggestion #5: Use Wise Variety in Worship.

One of my members has a master’s degree and worked towards a doctorate. She grew up in the south, a southern Baptist. One time we were talking about worship styles; she said it took her 2-3 years to feel comfortable with Lutheran worship. It made me think: “If someone this smart took that long to get comfortable, then I have to make sure I do all that I can make our worship ‘user friendly.’” Because of that, we use service folders.

Now, I regularly – but not always – use hymnal liturgies. I generally will reference the page number, and send people to that page in the front of the hymnal. At the same time, it seems to be wise to use lots of variety within the liturgical framework.

For example, one Sunday instead of using the written confession, why not sing a confessional psalm? If you have a service focused on creation, instead of the Apostles Creed, why not use the meaning to the 1st Article? How about in place of the song of praise you sing a couple verses of a well-known, well-loved hymn, like “Amazing Grace” or “Rock of Ages” or “I Know that My Redeemer Lives”? Please notice – I’m NOT suggesting that we do away with the liturgy! I do not for a minute believe that liturgical worship needs to be a

hindrance to congregational health. If it's well done, liturgical worship is a wonderful *help* in building a healthy congregation, for so much theology is contained both in the words of the liturgy and in the form.

But liturgical worship done in a boring or pedantic fashion *will* be a problem. For example, I've heard pastors say the absolution with not even the hint of a smile. Really? We're announcing the best news of all and we don't smile? Similarly, I've seen men race through the blessing, with seemingly no pastoral tone or individual focus. Those things *are* obstacles to congregational health, for if the pastor gives the impression that worship is a thoughtless repetition of words, can we be surprised if our people feel the same? Use of wise variety can help protect against boring/pedantic worship.

Some will say, "But the church has used the liturgy for years! It would be foolish for us to use anything but those liturgical songs!" The songs of the liturgy are wonderful! Treasures! It's valuable for us to use them often!

But we've been blessed with amazing advances in technology and opportunity. We can – with relative ease – bring amazing variety to our people, within the liturgical format and carrying through the liturgical theology. Does it not make sense that we would make use of those things? Of course!²³

So, use wisdom. We do NOT want to get rid of the excellent things which were done in the past. But at the same time, there are excellent things – hymns, psalm-settings, videos, etc – which are being developed today. Use the best of the old, and the best of the new.

And by the way – using wise variety won't lower your congregation's appreciation for worship; it will raise it because they'll see that you, pastor, take it seriously. You put thought into it week-by-week, changing things, not for the sake of change, but making meaningful changes in keeping with that week's theme. In other words, people will see you pursuing *excellence*, and that will raise their appreciation for solid, Lutheran, liturgical worship.

One particular challenge for us today; singing. Quick – where (other than church) do you find the masses of people singing? The national anthem before the basketball game? (And, how does that go?) Church may be the only place where people actually sing. Because of that, we may have to put more energy into teaching people hymns, or introducing them. Use your choir (or soloist or small group) to sing the first verse or two of a hymn. Give a soloist a microphone so that he/she can help people get the melody. Perhaps use a "hymn of the month," singing one of the great hymns of Christianity each Sunday for the month, so that people get used to it and can sing it well.

And one final thought – make use of other instruments. One of our members, who is now here at WLS, is a drummer. When he was still at home, he was willing to play the drums along with the hymns. It added a wonderful depth. We didn't do it every Sunday, we didn't do it for every hymn. But we did it sometimes. Use variety. Wisely.

Suggestion #6: Technology Can Be Our Friend

God has blessed us with amazing technology. How can we use it to help us grow in the Word, to go with the Word? Can you do a Youtube video? Might it make sense for you to have a Facebook page? (Pastors need to be where people are; the people are on Facebook et.al.) What about your church website? For most of us, having a website's not really optional. (I earlier told the story about our new congregation in Morristown.)

There are multiple opportunities to use technology in worship and education. A picture's worth a thousand words. Could you PowerPoint a picture during your sermon or Bible study in order to make a point more vivid? Video clips can be helpful. What about web-learning? I'm not a "techie," so I don't know all the possibilities, but it's valuable for us to explore our options.

²³ During the non-festival half of the church year we primarily use the hymnal liturgies and during the festival half we use "home-made" liturgies which focus our attention on the time of the church year in which we find ourselves. Home-made liturgies have to be done with care so that the truths of Scripture come through clearly and accurately. When you write one, run it past a brother, just to double-check!

One warning; technology is not the means! Technology is merely a tool. We can spend an awful lot of time at the computer, time which could be better spent in members' homes or in visiting unchurched folks. If we remember the mission of the church – that we're here to grow in the Word and go with the Word – we'll use technology wisely, neither becoming its slave, nor ignoring its potential.

Suggestion #7: Pastors, Take care of Your Own Spiritual Health

Since 7 is one of the numbers of God, I determined that I would limit myself to seven suggestions! There are so many other things we could talk about – the importance of church discipline, the continued need for instruction to our kids and youth, the importance of pastoral judgment and example, the need for brothers to both love and trust each other and to hold each other accountable, etc. But this is to be a paper, not a book.

So, the last suggestion I'll offer is this: pastors – take care of yourselves spiritually. "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16 NIV).

Some time back a man graduated from our seminary, took a call, but eventually resigned. He later wanted to come back to ministry, and the district president assigned to him the task of writing a paper on why guys resign from the ministry. He dug into it, interviewed a bunch of guys who'd resigned.

There were a variety of reasons for the resignations, anything from "cause" to lack of giftedness to burnout. But he found one common thread; every one of the guys who had resigned had stopped doing devotional reading.

The ministry is awesome! The percentage of people in the world who are orthodox Lutheran pastors is tiny! And you're one of them! So am I! What an amazing blessing!

But it's also hard! And if you've noticed, in the first 6 suggestions, a whole bunch of them would seem to hinge on the pastor. Preus writes: "Pastors, called by God to preach and teach the Word, invite scrutiny by their very office. If you can't stand the scrutiny, then don't be pastor" (370). Peter said it this way: "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God ..." (1 Pet 4:17a NIV). And of course James says, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1 NIV). God has placed a heavy burden on our shoulders. So, pastors, it's imperative that you and I take care of our spiritual health!

When an airplane loses its oxygen and the oxygen masks drop, parents are told, "First put your own mask on, then help your child." Why so? Because if you can't function, you won't be able to help others function.

The analogy for us called workers is clear. If we're not spiritually healthy – if we're not growing in the Word ourselves and going with the Word ourselves – then we'll have a very difficult time leading our congregations to health.

Called workers, keep opening your Bibles! Drink richly of the refreshing waters of life (John 4)! Hear the voice of Your Shepherd (John 10)! Be reminded of the depth of God's love for you, the riches of the eternal inheritance which is yours (Ephesians 1)! Remember your baptisms, partake of the Supper! Then, built by the Word and Sacraments, you'll be reminded that it really *doesn't* depend on you. It really depends on God (cf. 1Corinthians 1). Assured of that, we'll be empowered to do the work of an evangelist (2Timothy 4:5) and equipped to lead a congregation into the quiet pastures and to the still waters (Psalm 23).

Closing Thoughts:

At this point some of you are cheering, some of you are jeering, and some of you are just waiting for "afterglow." This subject is tough; it takes lots of honest reflection. It's vital that we address it, since the work we're doing is eternal.

But much of what we've discussed is a function of the law, and the law batters and bruises. Who of us could say that we've led our congregations to health in all manners? Perfectly? Yeah right. It hasn't happened.

But we need to strive for excellence! The love of Christ compels us (2 Corinthians 5)! Preus says: “The church needs to set her sights high and expect what God expects.”

But Preus then goes on: “He expects neither numerical growth in every situation nor glorious reports of how well we are doing. He expects faithfulness to the pure doctrine and the Sacraments. This faithfulness will always involve proclaiming justification by grace for Christ’s sake, teaching Luther’s Catechism, and teaching the theology of the cross” (53). That’s helpful.

Seeing the calling to excellence which is required from us called workers, it may lead us to feel like Moses at the burning bush, not sure that we can do what God has called us to do. Walther’s Pastoral Theology contains these words:

About God calling Moses who wanted to withdraw from the call because of his stuttering, Luther writes: “If God were as smart as we are, He would certainly have begun everything better than otherwise happened. For here He takes for this difficult, high work one who cannot speak well, as Moses himself confessed. But God says to him: Go and carry it out. That is the same as if He told a blind man that he should see well, a lame man that he should run well, a mute man that he should speak well. Could God not find someone else to use for this work?”

But it is written so that we may learn God’s attitude. What counts in the eyes of the world, He does not regard. He rejects and discards what others grab for. He throws away what others love and exalt....He gives Moses a correct answer and says:Do you think that I do not know that you stutter, as if I did not hear it?

So it seems to us, for we always want to outdo God in His works, as if we were the very first to see these faults, shortcomings, and frailties, but God did not see them. What does it matter, God says, so what if you are deaf, blind, or mute? If I say and command something to you, can I not give you sight, hearing, and speech? (29-30)

Yes, God knows your frailties, yes, God knows your weaknesses. Mine too. He called you and me to ministry not because of our strength, but because He’s gracious. He who is gracious is also powerful, able to strengthen you and me to be the best called workers we are able to be, able to bring health to our congregations, according to His pleasure! He reminds us that we’re His children, washed, justified, sanctified! (1Corinthians 6:11) Ah! That helps!

Probably the most satisfying part of writing this paper was seeing the answers which our men gave to the last question on my survey: “Complete this sentence: ‘The two things which give me the most confidence about our spiritual health as a synod are ...’” Below are some typical responses:

- Continued emphasis on the Word.
- Christ is the Head of our church and that is clear in doctrine and practice
- Doctrinal purity.
- We focus on the means of grace.
- our firm foundation in God's Word
- our commitment to the truth and purity of God's word
- God has still allowed us to retain the pure Word, which is the only thing that works
- MLC, WLS
- The means of grace are still valued, pure and practiced among us.
- We still have the Means of Grace
- faithfulness to God's Word.
- devotion to the Word of God

- The training the pastors receive in preparation for their ministries.
- Our faithful God.
- that God has preserved His pure Word in our congregations

And I could have listed dozens more! Is that not inspiring? We KNOW from whence spiritual health comes – it comes from God, working through the Word and Sacraments!

And that gives us confidence! It is Word and Sacrament which builds congregational health. We HAVE the Word! We HAVE the sacraments! God has blessed us so that we see them as they are: HIS Words, HIS sacraments!

And so we're able to look at ourselves, to ask tough questions, to not stick our heads into the sand, but to recognize weaknesses, "sicknesses."

But we KNOW the cure! We HAVE the cure! And by the grace of God, you and I get the honor of sharing that cure, proclaiming that cure, and through that, congregational health is built. That's an incredible honor! Walther put it this way:

If you could learn at this place how to prolong the life of those who will be entrusted to your care by fifty years or even to raise the dead to a new lease of life here in time, how great and glorious your calling would appear, not only to you, but to all men! In what great demand you would be! How you would be esteemed as extraordinary men! What a treasure men would think they had obtained if they had obtained you! And yet, all this would be as nothing compared with the sublimeness and glory of the calling for which you are to be trained here. You are not to prolong this poor, temporal life of those who will be entrusted to your care, but you are to bring to them the life that is the sum of all bliss, the life that is eternal, without end. You are not to raise those entrusted to your care from temporal death to live once more this poor temporal life, but you are to pluck them out of their spiritual and eternal death and usher them into heaven. (Law and Gospel, 36-37)

That is the ultimate spiritual health! And you are leading people to those glorious days!

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Addenda:

1. Addendum #1 - Barna Report
2. Addendum #2 – Complete Answers to Question #2, “Mark the three which you consider to be the top three biggest hindrances/threats to congregational health today.”
3. Addendum #3 – Complete Answers to Question #3: Mark three things which you think are most important for building a healthy congregation.
4. Addendum #4 – Complete Answers to Question #4, “If I want a congregation to become more healthy, I would start by...”
5. Addendum #5 – Complete Answers to Question #5: Complete this sentence: "The two things that most worry me about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."
6. Addendum #6 – Answers to Question #6: Complete this sentence: "The two things which give me the most confidence about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."
7. Addendum #7 – School of Outreach Bible Study on “The Mission of the Church”
8. Addendum #8 – an example of a worship order using variety within the liturgical form.
9. Addendum #9 – an example of a sermon by Pastor Don Patterson, illustrating preaching gospel-empowered sanctification

Addendum #1 – Barna Report

Many Churchgoers and Faith Leaders Struggle to Define Spiritual Maturity

America may possess the world’s largest infrastructure for nurturing human spirituality, complete with hundreds of thousands of houses of worship, thousands of parachurch organizations and schools, and seemingly unlimited products, resources and experts.

Yet, a new study from the Barna Group identifies an underlying reason why there is little progress in helping people develop spiritually: many churchgoers and clergy struggle to articulate a basic understanding of spiritual maturity. People aspire to be spiritually mature, but they do not know what it means. Pastors want to guide others on the path to spiritual wholeness, but they are often not clearly defining the goals or the outcomes of that process.

The research was conducted by Barna Group in partnership with Living on the Edge (www.livingontheedge.org) and included a nationwide, random sample of adults and a similar national survey among Protestant pastors, exploring definitions of, perceptions about, and perceived barriers to spiritual maturity.

Five Challenges

The study showed five significant challenges when it comes to facilitating people’s spiritual growth.

1. Most Christians equate spiritual maturity with following the rules.

One of the widely embraced notions about spiritual health is that it means “trying hard to follow the rules described in the Bible” – 81% of self-identified Christians endorsed this statement, and a majority agreed strongly (53%). Even among those individuals defined by their belief that salvation is not earned through “good works,” four out of five born again Christians concurred that spiritual maturity is “trying hard to follow the rules.”

2. Most churchgoers are not clear what their church expects in terms of spiritual maturity.

An open-ended survey question asked churchgoers to describe how their church defined a “healthy, spiritually mature follower of Jesus.” Half of churchgoers simply said they were not sure, unable to venture a guess regarding the church’s definition. Even among born again Christians – that is, a smaller subset of believers who have made a profession of faith in Christ and confessed their sinful nature – two out of five were not able to identify how their church defines spiritual maturity. Among those who gave a substantive response, the most common responses were having a relationship with Jesus (16%), practicing spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study (9%), living according to the Bible (8%), being obedient (8%), being involved in church (7%), and having concern for others (6%).

3. Most Christians offer one-dimensional views of personal spiritual maturity.

A second open-ended question probed self-identified Christians’ *personal* definition of what it means to be a healthy, spiritually mature follower of Jesus, regardless of how they believe their church defines it. One-fifth of self-described Christians were unable to offer an opinion. Other identified elements included: relationship with Jesus (21%), following rules and being obedient (15%), living a moral lifestyle (14%), possessing concern about others (13%), being involved in spiritual disciplines (13%), applying the Bible (12%), being spiritual or having belief (8%), sharing their faith with others (6%), and being involved in church activities (5%). Born again Christians were similar in all respects to self-described Christians except they were more likely to mention having a relationship with Jesus (30%) as the sign of spiritual maturity. Further reflecting a lack of depth on the subject, the open-ended questions typically produced, on average, just one response from survey respondents, despite the fact that interviewers repeatedly probed for additional or clarifying comments.

4. Most pastors struggle with feeling the relevance as well as articulating a specific set of objectives for spirituality, often favoring activities over attitudes.

The research among pastors highlighted several inter-related challenges. First, while nearly nine out of 10 pastors said that a lack of spiritual maturity is the most significant or one of the largest problems facing the nation, a minority of pastors believe that spiritual immaturity is a problem *in their church*. A second challenge is that only a minority of churches has a written statement expressing the outcomes they are looking for in spiritually mature people. A third challenge is that pastors often favor activities over perspectives in their definitions of spiritual maturity. Their metrics for people's spirituality include the practice of spiritual disciplines (19%), involvement in church activities (15%), witnessing to others (15%), having a relationship with Jesus (14%), having concern for others (14%), applying the Bible to life (12%), being willing to grow spiritually (12%), and having knowledge of Scripture (9%).

5. Pastors are surprisingly vague about the biblical references they use to chart spiritual maturity for people.

One of the reasons churches struggle with making disciples may relate to the lack of clarity that pastors have about the underlying biblical passages that address the process of spiritual maturity. This is most clearly reflected in the huge proportion of pastors who give *generic* responses when asked to identify the most important portions of the Bible that define spiritual maturity. In fact, one-third of pastors simply said "the whole Bible." Other generic responses included "the gospels" (17%), the New Testament (15%), and Paul's letters (10%). In all, the survey showed that three-quarters of pastors mentioned some type of generic answer to this query. In addition, one out of every five pastors gave a *semi-generic* response, such as "Romans" or the "life of Christ."

As for *verse-specific* responses (mentioned by just one-fifth of pastors), the most common passages included: Galatians 5, John 3:16, Ephesians 4, Matthew 28, and Romans 12:1-2. Just 2% of pastors specifically identified the Galatians 5 passage relating to the "fruits of the Spirit," which includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. *Theme specific* answers represented just 7% of responses, including the Sermon on the Mount, the Great Commission, the Great Commandment, and the Beatitudes.

Five Opportunities

The research also identifies a number of opportunities that can be leveraged to address the problems related to spirituality maturity.

1. Christians and pastors have clarity about the major boundaries that must be addressed to tackle the problem.

What are the perceived reasons that people do not grow spiritually? Self-identified Christians were asked about the obstacles they experience while pastors were queried to see how well they understand the barriers facing their congregants. Church leaders believe the three primary obstacles to people's engagement are lack of personal motivation (32%), other competing obligations and distractions (26%), and lack of involvement in activities that nurture growth (19%). In this respect, they do not seem too far off in their perceptions. Born again Christians identify distractions (24%), lack of motivation (20%), and lack of involvement (13%) as challenges they face, even if two of the three are mentioned less frequently by adults than pastors. Born again Christians, however, are more likely than pastors to identify sinful behaviors and habits as tripping them up (14% of believers versus 8% of pastors).

2. While most Americans are relatively content with their spirituality "as is," millions aspire to grow spiritually.

Most adults think of themselves as both spiritually healthy as well as spiritually satisfied, which is both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that most people's satisfaction can lead to complacency. One

opportunity is to connect with the 18 to 20 million Americans who describe themselves as spiritually unhealthy or as dissatisfied with their personal spiritual maturity. Still, a majority of adults say they are “completely” (14%) or “mostly” healthy when it comes to spirituality (40%); nearly two-thirds of Americans describe themselves as “completely” (22%) or “mostly” satisfied with their spirituality (43%). The opportunity among these individuals is to help them move beyond complacency and embrace a deeper understanding of spiritual growth.

3. Compared to older believers, Christians under the age of 40 are less satisfied with spirituality and less “rule oriented.”

Young Christians show signs of spiritual openness that older adults do not. People under the age of 40 are different than those Christians over 40 by being less satisfied spiritually and also rating their spiritual health less favorably. In addition, the generational difference over rule-following was striking: most Elders (ages 63+) and Boomers (44 to 62) strongly endorsed the spiritual metric of rule-following (66% and 56%, respectively); however, fewer than half of Busters (25 to 43) and Mosaics (18 to 24) embraced this view (45% and 33%). Among the young, this signals a dangerous propensity to rethink the Bible’s standards, but it also shows unique responsiveness to grace and forgiveness.

4. Pastors realize they need more help when it comes to assessing spiritual health.

Just 9% of clergy said they were completely satisfied with their ability to measure and assess the spiritual health of their congregation. Still, few pastors (8%) were expressly dissatisfied, leaving a majority of leaders moderately satisfied. Perhaps churchgoers would become less complacent about self-evaluation as pastors embrace more effective forms of evaluation for their congregations.

5. Pastors tend to be harder on themselves than are congregants.

About 1 out of 10 pastors said the church itself was a barrier to people’s growth, while none of the churchgoers offered a similar critique. Similarly, when asked to rate the church’s ability to help people grow spiritually, pastors were significantly less likely (6%) than churchgoers (33%) to give the organization high marks, reflecting the fact that pastors are often their own toughest critics. The opportunity is to forge a greater sense of partnership and mutual esteem between leaders and laity to address the challenges, to work against self-deception in the process, and to craft deeper, more appropriate routes to spiritual maturity.

Implications

David Kinnaman, President of the California-based research firm, directed the research project. He pointed out several implications of the study:

“America has a spiritual depth problem partly because the faith community does not have a robust definition of its spiritual goals. The study shows the need for new types of spiritual metrics. One new metric might be a renewed effort on the part of leaders to articulate the outcomes of spiritual growth. Another might be the relational engagement and accountability that people maintain. Of course, spirituality is neither a science nor a business, so there is a natural resistance to ascribing scientific or operational standards to what most people believe is an organic process. Yet, the process of spiritual growth is neither simplistic nor without guidelines, so hard work and solid thinking in this arena is needed.”

“As people begin to realize that the concepts and practices of spiritual maturity have been underdeveloped, the Christian community is likely to enter a time of renewed emphasis on discipleship, soul care, the tensions of truth and grace, the so-called ‘fruits’ of the spiritual life, and the practices of spiritual disciplines. A related challenge is that as spiritual formation becomes ‘trendy’ it will inevitably become ‘watered down’ with products that over-promise or are simply counter-productive. Leaders have to take on this issue more effectively, and part of that task is weeding out the good from bad.”

Research

This report is based upon nationwide telephone surveys conducted by The Barna Group with random samples of adults, age 18 and older, and Protestant clergy. The survey among adults was conducted in August 2008 among 1005 adults randomly selected from across the continental United States. The maximum margin of sampling error associated with the aggregate sample is ± 3.2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The survey among pastors included 611 clergy, with a maximum margin of sampling error of ± 4.0 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Statistical weighting was used to calibrate the sample to known population percentages in relation to demographic variables.

“Born again Christians” are defined as people who said they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Respondents are not asked to describe themselves as “born again.”

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Addendum #2 – Survey Answers

Complete Answers to Question #2:

“Mark the three which you consider to be the top three biggest hindrances/threats to congregational health today.”

Misplaced priorities of the family unit. (sports, work, etc.)

materialism and "busy-ness" pulling people in many directions

viewing spiritual growth outside of worship as unimportant

Pastors not equipping laity - delegating not just "jobs" but responsibility to laity

More on the breakdown of the family: even with the family intact - our parents struggle to be the spiritual influence they have been called to be

lack of follow up

I would like to have chosen a few more, especially in the areas of lack of vision by pastors, people and Synodical leaders.

corporate mindset in church (bottom line numbers) rather than trust in the Means of Grace

minimal involvement in church life by laity because of materialism and family secular activities

Gospel crowded out by materialism. Gospel taken for granted (the passing rainshower)

the attitude of indifference toward the things of God, the attitude that we can get by as churches with little, with crumbs of the Word instead of a loaf, with casual approaches to worship and ministry, instead of intense approaches. The Bible says if you sow sparingly, you reap sparingly. And our churches for decades have been sowing sparingly and now are facing the consequences.

differences among pastors in philosophy of ministry

confusion about what spiritual health is (is it the description given us in God's word about spiritually mature believers or is it someone who attends church regularly?)

the work of the devil and his forces

Apathy/lack of commitment

American Evangelicalism

worldly busyness and materialism - too many things to accomplish (perceived)

Lack of inner-connectedness/family atmosphere

It always involves the word - or lack of use of it.

Allowing busyness to crowd Jesus and His Word out of their lives

Spiritual apathy

Traditional church membership is declining/ loyalty is out.

Reliance on the federal government rather than God - this same applies to Synod rather than our own local leaders

(The above are checked because it would let the survey go through with out it. 1. The busyness of our culture. 2.

Lay people being taught but not equipped. 3. Pastors and lay people trying to live as if it were 1950.

factions and cliques that arise in the church

If by subjectivity of the American Culture you also mean the willingness to compromise and be politically correct, then I would mark this one as well, if not, then mark other.

the devil, the world and our flesh

Lack of trust and respect in spiritual leaders

The lack of trust in God's promises and Gospel power

I believe that lovelessness and superficial participation in a congregation can also be a major obstacle. A congregation that doctrinally has things straight, but that is shallow in love has a big problem. The message of God's love that is the gospel must be sounded clearly with good, faithful preaching and teaching but also accompanied by love in the hearts and lives of God's people that accomplishes the building of the body of Christ as we serve each other for the common good. I also believe that personal and family devotional study of the Word is key simply because of the power of the word to accomplish the goal of spiritual health. For that reason, public worship is important too. Without the regular hearing of the Word and fellowship in worship, it is hard for a congregation as a whole to be healthy. How can a body missing many of its parts be healthy?

Community involvement that pulls members away from worship/formal Bible study; false concepts of stewardship

I marked "Pastoral laziness" but it may even more often be discouragement.

“Mark the three which you consider to be the top three biggest hindrances/threats to congregational health today.”

I wouldn't all it the immorality of the community but the pressure of the community to get involved with so many other things, especailly focused at our children that families are faced with chosing church or social and sport activities.

Prioritizing other things above faith (family, hobbies, career)

lack of secretarial help to free the pastor to visit people

People's priorities

Lack of male spiritual leadership at HOME

neglect of catechism and hymnal in the home

the dominance of sports among kids

Addendum #3 – Survey Answers

Complete Answers to Question #3:

“Mark three things which you think are most important for building a healthy congregation.”

Third after means of grace marked above is building strong fellowship ties

Helping the home become the spiritual center for the family - I'll take a family having devotions together 5 times a week, over a family that comes to church every Sunday or sends their kids to an LES.

I would like to have chosen about 3 more.

"Teaching stewardship regularly means more to me than teaching financial stewardship. It refers to the entire life of sanctification as the believer seeks to serve God in every aspect of his or her life.

PAstoral visits both with members and prospects if he is actually using the means of grace rather than simply making a social call. Many members have a me-centered approach to faith and church. We need to teach that faith is multi-dimensional: it is a walk with Christ, an immersion into his gospel, and ALSO a fellowship with brothers in the faith that is real family participation, and mission or ministry where each part of the Body does its work.

Christ-centered, dynamic preaching & creative use of liturgical worship

excellence in liturgical worship

spiritually mature members (strong faith and faithful lives) mentor others in faith AND life

Leadership training

lay members who are willing to encourage their fellow members for Bible Study

Home visits are an important part of accomplishing all three.

Building relationships among the members of the congregation

All called workers recognize this is not the WELS of 20 years ago.

aggressively building relationships within the congregation - love one another

Unfair question! :-)

3. Having a real relationship with Jesus (ex: having Bible studies that not only teach (head) but touch (heart).

Proclaim law in its severity and gospel in its sweetness

Clear proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, not a watered down Jesus.

Good preaching and teaching of law and gospel

Getting the Word to as many people as possible, in as many different ways as possible because the Word alone has power to provide spiritual health. Personal study (equipping for each day and reinforcing each day what is important), Bible Class (and the insights shared there as well as the teaching, and the fellowship that is built there), and the worship (nothing like good gospel-preaching, the sacrament, and a Christ-centered liturgy to build people up).

knowing the doctrinal distinctives and practice which identify them as a Lutheran congregation and not a community church clone.

Revitalizing and re-energizing our pastors through more rich and frequent feeding on the gospel for their own souls.

The REAL health of the congregation is a result of the Holy Spirit's work within the hearts of the people. Preaching the Word faithfully and I cautiously add, practically is the only way that any of us can really increase the health of any congregation.

Excellence in all we do

Getting families to discuss spiritual issues/devotion together at home

Equipping God's people to live in the Word

Getting our lay people and pastors to read confessional Lutheran literature

helping members understand their responsibility for one another

Delinquent Work

Addendum #4 – Survey Answers

Complete Answers to Question #4

“If I want a congregation to become more healthy, I would start by...”

Trying to get more people in Bible study.

focusing on the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament and do all I could to help people stay or become exposed to them.

Getting more people into God's Word.

Getting people to Biblically evaluate their commitment to their congregation.

modeling health through study of his Word

use every means possible to bring means of grace to congregation members

having people use the Means of Grace more frequently

Visiting every family and encouraging them with the gospel to pursue spiritual growth

Getting lay leaders into regular Bible study

A Bible study on the mission of the church focused on equipping them for it and then giving them meaningful ministry to do it. The two areas I would focus on would be equipping them for informal witness (with accountability groups) and lay teachers/shepherds. working on my own spiritual health, the spiritual health of my family and then the spiritual health of the families of my congregation (in their home). By the way - I like a lot of the thoughts in Christian Schwarz's "Natural Church Development"

Sharing the Means of Grace with them more often.

planning carefully with my leadership so we work together

faithfully preaching and teaching law and gospel.

Leading a weekend leadership retreat for the men in the congregation

seeing the people and sharing the Word. "See the people and share the Word; See the people and share the Word; See the people and share the Word."

Getting more of my members into Bible study

Bible Study at all meetings. Setting Mission, Vision, and Objectives that emphasize people being in the Word

Getting the people into the Word more often.

Getting people more regularly and deeply into God's Word.

Getting more people into the Word

faithfully devoting myself to the application of the means of grace in my own home and in the congregation

Getting them into the Word

Emphasizing the means of grace

Challenging the congregation to read through the Bible.

praying, working on my spiritual health (reading, study and life), improving worship and Bible study, and pushing evangelism.

Having the time to personally take every individual member back to the cross

walking the streets and sharing the Gospel. Then I would show this to the members of the congregation and ask them to go with me.

There is nothing more healthier for a congregation than to share the faith of the members.

dragging people to the means of grace

Helping members understand and practice Christian love by serving others

having our called workers at church and school model regular congregational Bible class passionate interest and ongoing attendance.

emphasizing the means of grace

Getting the word on the peoples heart as often as possible

good preaching

myself getting more into the Word

home visits with personal Bible Study and at that home visit give a personal invitation to a specific group Bible Study

majoring in the majoring (gospel, fellowship and mission) and calling the members to focus their lives on these same things and see church not as a club or institution but a body, an organism where living faith is the key to health

depends on church size

urging people to more genuinely repent and learn what it really means to be a Christian.

conducting an every home Bible study to discuss personal spiritual health.

more pastoral home visits in large congregations

Applying means of grace

Making sure enough staff is available

“If I want a congregation to become more healthy, I would start by...”

building up individual's faith through the Means of Grace.
 encouraging all members to be in the Word more frequently and faithfully.
 Teaching them all how to read their Bibles and encouraging them to do it every day
 leading everyone through BIC again, and then developing a continuing curriculum to keep them in the Word and grow in faith and an awareness of putting their gifts into action at home, work, church, etc.
 understanding what spiritual health is for myself, then mentor a few leaders
 Praying for it regularly.
 growing stronger leaders
 preaching the gospel
 getting members to recognize their vital role in staying connected to the Means of Grace and encouragement for others
 Encouraging Bible Study
 Visiting every member, in their home.
 Helping people get into the Word personally.
 Getting them into the Word.
 increasing their contact with the word in worship and Bible study.
 Making sure each sermon preached proper law and gospel
 Visiting them and encouraging them to come to church where Word and Sacrament are
 preaching repentance.
 Getting a larger percentage into the Word
 ... getting them into the Word in worship & Bible study
 Praying for Holy Spirit to guide me and visit members with the Word by encouraging Bible study and reading
 Bible Study, Bible Study, Bible Study
 Getting more people involved with the tasks of the congregation
 Making a BIC review expected for all members
 connecting the people to the Word and to each other
 Working first on my own spiritual growth.
 Praying for God's guidance and digging into the Word for strength and direction.
 Helping people recognize their spiritual apathy
 preaching the Gospel like crazy
 Getting them into the Word on a regular basis.
 Visiting all the members with the purpose of a heart-to-heart conversation about their spiritual health (individual, household, congregational, synodical spheres).
 Having them read Jesus' command to love one another
 Making contact with a member who isn't coming to church anymore.
 determining what it is we do best with the gifts we have within our congregation
 stepping up my own devotional life
 distinguishing law/gospel; justification/sanctification; clarity on sacraments.
 teaching fathers to read the Bible to their family at home
 Bible classes on doctrinal basics like This We Believe
 modelling a healthy spiritual life by getting into their lives.
 Visiting the members of the congregation more often.
 Getting more people into their Bibles.
 taking them and Jesus to the streets.
 emphasizing the purpose of the church.
 strengthening my members in their faith
 personal encouragement for God's people to be involved in the Word more regularly and more in depth
 encouraging the use of the Means of Grace
 seeking to growing in my own faith/life and then encouraging others to do the same by being more regular and faithful in my use of the Means of Grace.
 offering many and varied Bible Studies.
 Getting every member into regular Bible study
 having people come and meet their Lord in worship and grown through that
 leading the congregation to understand the reason and purpose for its existence (to reach out to the lost and to help those who have

“If I want a congregation to become more healthy, I would start by...”

been found to grow in their spiritual life).

Getting into the homes of my people more often to discover their needs and offer law/gospel as needed

Getting the leaders to show leadership by being in Bible Class regularly.

Helping them understand the importance of regular use of the means of grace.

Getting them into their Bibles

and continue to proclaim the law and the gospel

having our lay people understand how truly important Bible Study is to their spiritual health.

Praying to God for wisdom on how best to proceed.

learning what leaders and members perceive our problems to be

stressing Word and Sacrament (not canned liturgies); preparing an entire service, not just the sermon.

Teaching more people the mission of the church

focusing the members on the means of grace!

emphasis on Bible study (worship, BC, home study, etc)

offering more opportunities to hear (study) God's Word.

doing more personal Bible study and leading more family devotions

pushing Bible study participation in every possible way as hard as I could.

Finding ways to bring more people into contact with the Word and Sacraments.

Praying for the Holy Spirit's help

encouraging more members to attend worship and bible study

trying to help more people fall in love with God's Word.

Being upfront and direct about the importance of growing in faith through regular Bible study, worship and Sacrament

focusing on getting every member into Bible study each week.

encourage personal and corporate Bible study participation.

increasing Bible study

Getting as many members as possible into personal Bible reading and Bible study.

praying for God's kingdom to come and then encourage corporate and individual Bible study. In the corporate settings I would greatly encourage fellowship opportunities so that when we do gather together we actually are carrying out Hebrews 10:25.

Getting the Word to as many people as possible in as many ways as possible.

checking my own faithfulness with the means of grace and prayer.

constant and continuing emphasis on the gospel.

Establishing a way of getting into homes of members for visits on a more regular basis

exposing our lack of spiritual health with God's law.

Visiting all member homes to encourage spiritual growth.

doing pastoral visits that express genuine care and encourage diligent use of the means of grace.

doing in home pastoral visits.

Inviting them to join us for Bible Study opportunities.

Getting to know my members even better

by finding a way to get everyone into some Bible study.

Putting my faith in the Means of Grace

Getting members into the Word of God

personally inviting and encouraging people to plan for their spiritual growth by talking about worship attendance, bible study attendance, personal Bible study and service with the Word of God.

Patient and systematic catechesis on all age levels.

Bible study

urging the members to make the Word of God part of their daily routine, along with weekly worship and Bible study attendance.

Getting people into the gospel in Word and sacrament. That alone changes hearts and makes people spiritually healthy and motivated to do outreach, use gifts, etc.

Visiting in their homes

Getting into the homes more to share God's word with them personally.

compiling its apparent weaknesses.

filling the pastor as full of the gospel as possible.

taking the plank out of my own eye to see clearly the task of leading, teaching, encouraging and preaching God's people to their Jesus through the Means of Grace.

“If I want a congregation to become more healthy, I would start by...”

Laying the foundation for every-member bible study

encouraging Bible Study at home and at church.

encouraging more regular worship and bible Class attendance

teaching them about worship and how it connects to every day life.

teaching in every way and forum possible the theology of the cross and the proper understanding of vocation on the part of all our members.

Meeting personally with each family and personally talking about the importance of the Word in their lives and in conjunction, equip them to participate (Ephesians 4) because God does not want anyone sitting on the bench but each member and the whole is built up as each part does its work

doing a sermon series and tie in Bible studies on "Getting into God's Word"

Making sure I was as deeply connected to the means of grace as possible.

Gospel preaching, not legislating

encouraging spiritual growth through the study of God's Word.

Getting every member into regular Bible study.

encouraging by word and example the need to be "in the Word."

emphasizing (and I mean beating a dead horse) the importance of Bible study.

Teaching my people the blessings of regular personal Bible study at home in the family

encouraging personal Bible reading

Visiting every home

Making more personal visits

Training our Sunday School parents on how to do home devotions and review the SS Bible Story each week with their child.

addressing its sickness with Law & Gospel in worship

evaluating the application of the Means of Grace.

focusing on family responsibility toward involvement in the Word and Sacrament

helping people understand the blessings they are receiving through the means of grace which are front and center in liturgical worship.

Making sure that they are into the Word

Inviting the members by groups to my house for a bar-b-q.

Getting the Church Council to Bible Class so that they know in what manner they are to lead and what it is they believe and are leaders of.

Getting them into the Word as much as possible.

Getting in the Word.

keeping the Shepherd before his Sheep through the means of grace

offering two or three different BIC classes and asking the members to come and bring a friend.

reminding them of the importance of the Means of Grace in the ministry of the congregation.

emphasizing the Means of Grace

Visiting each member and encouraging them into the Word.

Making sure I myself am in the Word as much as possible.

making my own spiritual health job #1. (cf. August Pieper's "The True Reconstruction of the Church", The Wauwatosa Theology, Volume III

Visiting the people to find out where they're ailing spiritually.

Having them reading The Theology of the Cross by Prof. em. Deutschlander

working with the pastors who are willing to adapt and seeking help

more contact with members.

Offering more opportunities for Bible Study

Praying

by increasing their knowledge of Scripture; who they are in Christ!

Getting into the word more myself.

Making every effort, humanly possible, to bring the entire congregation into contact with God's Word.

Leading them into the Bible

continuing to preach the gospel

Getting into every members home to encourage them to be in worship regularly

implementing and encouraging a home Bible study program and more Bible class opportunities.

“If I want a congregation to become more healthy, I would start by...”

Genuinely model Christ

encouraging everyone to study the Bible more in some way

preaching law and gospel to as many as possible.

teaching them about the priesthood of all believers

Addendum #5 – Survey Results

Complete Answers to Question #5:

Complete this sentence: "The two things that most worry me about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

Focus being shifted from the church's real mission.

the misplaced priorities of the families that make up our Synod (grassroots involvement) and

Lack of trust that God will provide.

We are kidding ourselves with stats- many on our books no longer are committed members of our congregations.

declining funds to make worldwide outreach and growth possible

preoccupation with numerical growth in opposition to spiritual growth on individuals

sin of selfishness in stewardship

how many of our members only identify correct teaching as organ based, page 15 worship

Pastors who seem spent and content (resigned?) to the spiritual health status quo and seem out of initiative and ideas to improve it.

Little passion for the lost. Every year we have so many congregations with none or few adult confirmands. My experience is that there is little if any outreach activity (a measurable goal) being done in those congregations.

strong in doctrine (the teaching of my faith), strong in Bible History (the story of my faith), but weak in the relational aspect of our faith (This is my family of faith) We're afraid of the emotional side of faith - too touchy feely. All three are very important. Healthy growing churches get that.

focus on money.

too many people complaining and we are having self-fulfilling prophecies

Apathy

Those who keep attempting to minimize the core work

Entrenched in traditionalism

lack of loyalty

Lack of broad sense, (see above note), stewardship training with pastors and congregations afraid to face the Subject.

greed.

the shrinking number of members in Bible Study.

the challenges posed by today's immorality.

unhealthy kinds of criticism

number of delinquents

too much dependence on our own efforts to try make God's Kingdom come

Lack of Bible Study attendance

Apathy.

the perceived difficulty of the theology of glory / theo of the cross as it relates to the reality of simply getting members to tell their friends and neighbors about Jesus

laziness to improve our situation.

focus on finances

individuals being local congregation focused and not seeing themselves as important on a synodical level

growing number of WELS leaders who are more impressed with "numbers" than faithfulness to spreading the Gospel message.

Looking to the heterodox for help

Apathy in our use of the means of grace

We cannot stop a culture becoming post-Christian, like Europe.

selfishness (unwillingness to change to reach others)

the influence of church growth, Reformed theology upon both our clergy and laity

there is a split between Synod called workers and mature lay leaders and where many of our lay people are at. The maturity found in many called workers and lay leaders is not found in many of the laypeople. But we talk of our Synod as if our problems are on top, and by tweaking the clergy or the way Synod does business we will improve our Synod. I believe the focus needs to be on the reality of our laypeople, that many are doctrinally shallow, Biblically illiterate to events of salvation history, and have a mild interest in kingdom matters. We must face this fact instead of being enablers to the weak members among us.

differences in philos. of min. among pastors

people's lack of zeal for the gospel and love for souls (a sense that Jesus is not the only way to heaven or a naive sense of apathy that everyone's going to a "better place.")

lack of Bible study by the congregational leaders

Complete this sentence: "The two things that most worry me about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

loss of synodical focus on starting new churches

poor worship attendance

Cloning business models of leadership

the lack of priorities by individual members in their stewardship of time and money

the general lack of concern about the faithful use of the means of grace

Our families are breaking apart as fast or nearly as fast as those outside of our synod

The spiritual immaturity of our people

we're confused about what it is

diagnosing it mostly by quantitative methods.

Apathy

Pastors doubting the means of grace

Pastors who are loosely connected to Synod which leads to congregations that are islands to themselves

Apathy

the lack of discipline on those who are unfaithful in church attendance

the charges of heresy on those who are trying new ministry methods.

we have trouble focusing on spiritual health because we need to be so concerned about money

Pastors not faithfully attending circuit and conferences and talking to each other there.

People don't recognize why we need a synod

In our search for healing we seem to think that those outside our fellowship have what we need when they don't

our doctrine of the ministry overemphasizes the "everything is permissible..."

poor church attendance

... the affect of the continued moral decline of society.

Lack of study of God's Word

dead orthodoxy

Legalism - I sense that many people feel that our practices are based on "rules" of the church rather than Word of God

Little desire for growth in the Word

a majority of our people are not in the Word

my perception that it is harder to connect my own members to the work of the Synod.

The mindset that we need something inovative to attract more members, or some stewardship program that will inspire people to give more to the synod.

failure to appreciate the concept of "synod"--working together

the "someone else will do it" attitude

our attendance in worship.

Irregular or poor worship/communion/Bible study attendance, often a sign of lack of personal devotional life at home

lack of love for missions

our consuming attention to indebtedness. We borrowed from ourselves. Cancel the debt, get back to ministry

trying to do too much rather than focusing on our priorities for synodical ministry - i.e. missions and worker training

declining (I think) numbers of adult confirmations and baptisms

focus on \$\$\$/sanctity of synodical structure

our lack of family devotions being done synod-wide

The effect society has on our idea of what is necessary or even important for our people

Traditionalism

Pastors overworked in their congregations

People not spending time on their own in personal devotion and Bible Study.

The desire to hold on to the way we have always done it.

lack of willingness to change (not doctrinally, just forms).

lack of trust in our Lord

as we allow ourselves to get weaker in our use of the Word, we look to other means (programs, changes, etc.) to get us back on track

Low attendance in worship and Bible class

the sinful nature within me

the ongoing desire by the Synodical Council to chop up our ministerial education system.

our low expectations, which lead to chronic apathy

Complete this sentence: "The two things that most worry me about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

a lack of focus

the lack of trust among called workers.

the lack of true gospel content - specifically pointing to Christ as Savior and not just a good teacher - in the sermons I hear and read on line - most are pharisaical moralizing or how to live a good life, not baptismal drowning of the old Adam and restoration and forgiveness in Christ by which Christ creates change

the influence of Church Growth methodology

those (NOT SP) who second guess the efficacy of the Word

lack of attendance - worship & Bible study

Slanted questionnaire like these and

the polarizing of our pastors (Church and Change or not?)

recalling missionaries

We are not among our people enough

We are too materialistic --- leadership, pastor, lay folk.

The few people in Bible Study

not understanding the importance of properly trained Pastors

Lack of pastoral leadership in many cases

do we equate spiritual health to how many synod schools we have?

the lack of commitment to regular personal devotion

the failure to prioritize and carry out excellent programs of Bible study.

When I see people apathic about learning or sharing the Word.

Apathy toward use of the means of grace

the desire of some to grow(cf Matthew 24 :12 & 13)

The overwhelming nature of society's spiritual apathy and its influence among us.

We will compromise our faithfulness to God's Word for the sake of growth

our declining grade schools.

that we can have luke warm response to the gospel.

mistrust of called workers by called workers

declining worship attendance

our focus on the finances and how we communicate the reason for why we give, not to budget but to the Lord.

The over-reaction of thinking we have to be more focused on being relevant than preaching the gospel and loving people

a perceived apathy among called workers

fear that robs us of courage to present the gospel in ways that communicate to our present culture

The financial commitment of our members to the work we do as a syond is too small

our hesitance to follow through with the law and gospel into guided sanctified living.

an apparent pitting of missions versus ministerial education

a desire to adopt or adapt methods and practices that appear to work in business or other churches without a thorough discussion on whether the form of these methods or practices can be used without compromising the substance of God's full truth.

lack of stewardship among members.

lack of Scriptural knowledge and understanding among our laity.

The instability of our families in their spiritual life

we are too bogged down in budget concerns.

the destructive influence of Church Growth methodology

declining attendance in worship and Bible classes

The complaining that we often do.

uncritical assimilation of reformed methodologies falsely under the guise of aggressive outreach work.

Apathy among congregations & lay people

Money concerns dominating our conversations and clouding our focus on the gospel ministry the Lord Jesus has entrusted to us
spiritual apathy

Legalism

accepting the apathy & immorality of members as a 'sign of the times,' rather than a challenge to be met with God's Word.

minimal financial support of synod from N WI District.

congregations that seem to have lost sight of their purpose.

crucify my worry while I pray for God's people to mature in their faith through the Means of Grace.

Complete this sentence: "The two things that most worry me about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

A trend toward preservng traditional structures and practices at the expense of Christian freedom in some areas.

the breakdown of the family/home life

1. the lack of zeal by the majority of th 30 - 50 year old members.

"innovations" in worship that ape the evangelical-styles of worship and turn away from liturgical-styles of worship (choice of musical instruments is not the issue, but the form and content)

the failure to deal with evangelically those who would have the Synod teach a theology of glory; and

Our focus on money instead of mission (a business type approach to God's work instead of faith and faithfulness approach)

focus on finances and not the mission

The creeping threat of the theology of glory

the lack of gospel preachers

losing our youth and teens to the world

the efforts to make numbers more important than remaining grounded in the Word.

the possibility that a concern about financial problems will unintentionally become the focus

a lack of accountability on the part of pastors and

The laity don't know what the Bible says anymore

the failure of our pastors actually to practice the doctrine of church and ministry

dependance on others to do pastoral work

failure to identify the sins of greed and selfishness

Not being able to field and answer questions that others from outside our fellowship have about various topics by using their Bible to show them the answers

too many pastors not preaching in a Christ-centered, Bible-based, life-applicable way

Division

the politics of defending turf and programs rather than taking a more objective look at the overall needs of ministry.

a failure on the part of some in our synod to see the connection between doctrine and practice (e.g. people failing to see that "evangelical" forms of worship flow from reformed theology).

our lack of mission fervor, born of the gospel

Pastors spending half a work week on boring sermons

Baby Boomers and their lack of discipline for their children and church

indifference toward worship and Bible Study

a lack of overall vision and continuing to live in the past.

spiritual apathy

Small percentage of adults in Bible study

fewer people in directed Bible Study at church.

the tendency to want a theology of glory

Losing our foundation on God's word.

the average worship attendance of our congregations.

Legalism, especially over matters that are less than centered on the true mission of the church (example: worship style debates)

the growing attitude that the Means of Grace aren't sufficient to restore health.

the infiltration of pietism in our circles, to wit, the Church Growth Movement, Cell Bible Studies, treating church like a business, everything is an adiaphoron, etc.

lack of passion and commitment for outreach ministry

dwelling on fellowship issues

The grassroots mistrust of leadership of our synod

its top-down approach to most everything

lazy leaders

Tradition receives too much attention in comparison to what the Word says

those who believe that relationships are the most important part of outreach; God's Word is the msot important part. Relationships are nice, but not necessary in spreading the gospel.

we are too ready to accomodate worldliness

the temptation to lose our focus on the mission God has given us to preach the gospel.

more and more people are losing their connection to God's Word on a regular basis

our laity's lack of persoanl Bible study at home and at church.

Our people's decline of interest in things spiritual

Complete this sentence: "The two things that most worry me about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

loss of mission zeal due to low offerings

Synodical Council's continued attempts to undermine and eliminate the preparatory schools that give us the highest trained pastors among us;

our insufferable arrogance -- we act as if we are the only people who will be saved

The WELS no longer serves as a beacon of orthodoxy.

the number of people who claim to be on our church rosters (that make up our Synod) and haven't worshipped for years (pastoral/elder work needs to increase).

too many people with personal agendas.

We need to be starting 15-20 new churches per year and expect that not all of them will make it.

a fading emphasis on personal study

failure to relate Christ's message to our changing culture

the individual importance of faith to the current generation

how many of our pastors not by what we say, but by what we do, don't give spiritual growth and education enough emphasis.

Lay leaders whose personal growth in spiritual health beyond worship attendance is very weak

called workers who don't know how to get their members into meaningful ministry or don't trust them with meaningful ministry

We've forgotten what makes WELS so special. It's not WELS structure, institutions, schools, traditions, etc. on the synod or congregational level. It's our Means of Grace driven Gospel motivation and freedom to be all things to all people. The apostles and early christian church did a whole lot more with a whole lot less than what we have as the WELS today. Maybe God is trying to remind of of this in our troubling times as the WELS

negative motivation.

what is the synod plan for the next 25 years

opposition to needed changes

The pitiful number of regular worshippers and those studying scripture

Lack of vision of leadership

societal forces that are negative to our mission

Solutions = cuts.

a lack of concern for doctrinal integrity.

the shrinking number of children in our schools.

the competition for time for families to use God's Word.

take our synod and its work for granted

number of plateaued or dying congregations

a preoccupation with successfulness based on statistics

Temptations to be like "other successful churches" not based on the Word.

embracing or rejecting all practices from other denominations (embrace...there are dangers/reject...we can learn and adapt.)

financial stewardship and the sin of seeing the money that we have as ours and not God's

too involved in maintaining status quo, preserving an institution and getting solvent rather than sharing our faith.

wasteful spending ("if we don't spend it, it will be lost to another area of synod work")

congregations not willing to look beyond their plans and consider synod work as great importance also.

determining how many people want others to change the church's attitudes toward outreach without themselves being willing to invite others to hear the message of Jesus at their home church

deviation in practice

we seem to be focusing on symptoms rather than attacking the root of our problem through simple application of law and gospel

After 4 generations of Lutheranism, it is taken for granted.

talk about prayer, but not much praying

the false assumption by some that concern that great concern for doctrinal purity is somehow not compatible with a great drive for the lost, when the two always go hand in hand. Couple this with the apparent idea that Evangelism has become a mark/sign of the church or the article upon which the church now stands and falls. Add to that the idea that we supposedly have once and for all got our doctrine down pat and now its time to move on to other "more important things" like outreach

We are not giving enough attention to some fundamental aspects of faith life, such as daily repentance, suffering for Christ, growing roots deeply into Christ and his Word. We are creating events or resources that the cream of the crop of our Synod make use of - marriage retreats at fine motels, women's conferences, area Lutheran High Schools with tuition over \$8,000 but we are failing to shape our ministries that hit the rank and file and that cost them nothing to attend.

whole life stewardship training for all - motivation + specifics on "how"

materialism and misplaced priorities

Complete this sentence: "The two things that most worry me about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

we (WELS people) don't want to be any different than the people of the world
 loss of synodical focus on measuring results to see if ministry efforts are producing expected results
 poor Bible study attendance
 the potential for worship wars to break out
 None
 and the lack of commitment and enthusiasm for serving the Lord with time, talents, treasure, and testimony
 For far too many people, "it's all about me," and some of our pastors and teachers have been inclined to cater to that mindset.
 The negative attitude/ defeatist mentality of the pastorate
 we have a culture of "let's study the word" but not really keep it faithfully
 gazing longingly, by comparison, at the supposed spiritual health of the heterodox.
 emphasis on learning vs applying - Instead of more people in Bible class, we need more people in a close relationship with their Lord
 ignorance or apathy toward error
 Pastors who are not evangelical in their dealing with people which leads to people finding other churches or no church at all
 not in the Word
 the low levels of people who participate in Bible study
 the unwillingness to provide more support for congregations through the Board for Parish Services and Mission Counselors.
 Pastors not connecting with people
 the number who seem to be reading theological junk instead of sound, Lutheran theology.
 People don't see beyond their congregation
 We seem to be bored with made us spiritual in the first place
 we aren't clear on the doctrine of the church.
 poor bible study attendance
 ... the temptation to follow every wind and wave to the point of forsaking the one thing needed.
 Our members allowing the world and busyness to crowd Jesus, His Word and serving Him out of our lives
 lack of mission-mindset
 lack of participation in Bible Study
 Lack of urgency for outreach
 our leadership is focused on preserving the outward forms/institution of "WELS"
 Christianity and WELS decline of faithfulness to a particular denomination.
 Our tendency to incur vast amounts of debt in hopes of carrying out the Lord's work, but failing to recognize God's warning that the borrower will be servant to the lender. We need to become debt-free as a synod and as individual Christians, so that we can be free to give generously toward the Lord's work.
 agreeing on what is critical and crucial
 Gossip
 our attendance in Bible class.
 The apparent declining interest in formal Christian education (doesn't seem to be as high a priority anymore)
 lack of love for fellow pastors and teachers
 not understanding why we are a church body of small congregations and small schools
 the thought that unity means uniformity
 lack of available resources now that Parish Services is severely cut back
 mpt advocating for greater ownership by members
 our low numbers in Bible studies
 Lack of continuity in practice
 Stewardship motivation
 membership's low financial support toward ministry
 We are too influenced by the world.
 A spirit of us judgementalism.
 lack of love when dealing with one another.
 lack of doctrinal/Biblical literacy
 that we become overly influenced by ministry approaches of other church bodies and make the correlation that their results imply that their approach is sound
 Contemporary services that downplay Means of Grace
 the sinful nature within every other member of synod

Complete this sentence: "The two things that most worry me about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

increasing our focus on evangelism while seeming to consider adult spiritual growth of lower importance.
 our mis-guidedness in the area of stewardship
 trying to do a LOT, but skimping on it all - rather than doing less but doing it better
 the gossiping and back biting that often occurs as people make judgments about others without having direct contact with the person.
 The stress of society and the cultural idea of what success really is
 the number of people in Bible Study/worship on any given week
 Pastors who don't hold the mission of the church up in front of their people.
 aging of our congregations
 a lack of confidence in the gospel
 losing our true Lutheran teachings (by relying on methods more than God's Word)
 the vast numbers of straying in our congregations
 We are not involved in the community enough
 We have bought into patriarchal polity, instead of focusing in the universal priesthood and the diversity of gifts --- servant leadership!
 The many times I've heard poor preaching
 the emphasis of the Synod on "means" other than the means of Grace and work of the Holy Spirit
 Lack of financial support (CMO)
 do we treat divine calls (and workers who hold them) as if they are a dime a dozen?
 the in-fighting and petty "controversy" that have no basis on Scripture but on personal disagreements
 the willingness to chase after new stuff at the expense of core ministry (Bible study and worship).
 a temptation to look to programs to solve our problems.
 Apathy toward use of time, talents, and treasures toward the church's mission of proclaiming the gospel
 the desire of a few to streamline our worker training(cf 09 Synod Convention)
 The disconnect between young people and denominational membership.
 Focus on finances
 Parents not carrying out their spiritual responsibilities in the home.
 as individuals that make up the synod we don't share our faith aggressively.
 lack of full trust in the means of Grace to accomplish ministry goals
 few people reading and studying the Bible
 the lack of zeal to win souls for Christ among both laity and pastors. There also seems to be a slowness to forgive our brothers or become very skeptical of someones ministry when people are thinking out side of the box or even when God grants success.
 The overreaction of thinking that everything innovative to preach the gospel and serve people has to be Church-growth and condemned
 a lack of accountability between Christians, between congregations, and between called workers.
 emphasis on preserving doctrine in a way the slights sharing the gospel
 Like me, something like 40% of our pastors come through our two prep schools
 our emphasis on proclaiming Christ over and above living for him as his disciples... Where one increases, the other must increase.
 apparent disharmony among us regarding worship and outreach
 a lukewarmness among much of the laity toward spiritual matters both in zeal for God's truth and in showing God's love to our neighbor through deeds of kindness. The abundance of material blessings in our country and concern over them seems to contribute to this lukewarmness.
 Apathy towards mission work.
 perhaps a desire to grow in the wrong way (outwardly instead of inwardly through the Means of Grace)
 Our pastors are not effectively maturing their congregations
 our Bible class attendance averages are way too low.
 the disunity caused by lack of unity in doctrine and practice
 a lack of understanding the meaning of confessional Lutheranism
 The lack of brotherly encouragement that leads to factions (For Example; Issues in WELS versus Church and change)
 a laxity and disregard for the teaching and practice of church fellowship. When WELS pastors (one of the a district first vice president) attend baptist based conventions such as "Drive 08" in Atlanta, Georgia than it is a deep blow to the synod's spiritual health.
 lack of true and specific law/gospel preaching in sermons
 Budget concerns that keep threatening our core work of worker training and missions, when these areas which are at the heart of everything we do, and should be preserved. If we lose our well-trained workers, we will

Complete this sentence: "The two things that most worry me about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

lose the gospel in its truth and purity.

watering down our worker training system or changing it

Losing commitment to mission work

Shifting from an emphasis on the means of grace to whatever will get people into church.

Graying of membership in many congregations.

called leaders who themselves need to be re-energized by the gospel.

crucify my worry while I pray for our leaders to keep maturing in their faith through the Means of Grace.

Stunted stewardship may leave us short on resources for the foreseeable future.

the closing of our Lutheran Elementary Schools

2. the apathy of the large midwest congregations.

an apparent lukewarmness to the Gospel, as shown by our desires to walk away from truly LUTHERAN worship and by our lack of financial support of the Gospel

those whose decisions on behalf of the Synod fail to appreciate the priorities of the Synod in convention.

our focus on methodology instead of ministry

congregations not recognizing the importance of the synod

Professionalism

rampant legalism among called workers

the cares of life (hobbies, career, family) push out faith as a priority for more and more Christians

sacrificing God's Word for growth.

members may become too accustomed to the ways of the world and not see the importance of unity based on Scripture

pastors spending too much time exercising certain Christian freedoms without asking whether they are actually beneficial and constructive.

The laity will not tolerate the preaching of the law

the reality that the CMO is determined by the voters rather than the confirmed members

entertainment society

loss of youth to churches with contemporary ministries

Kids making the call about whether or not they should come to worship and Bible study based on the extra-curricular activities.

too many members not regularly in worship

doctrinal laxity

complacency among the clergy and laity that because we are WELS, we are secure. (We might call this the "children of Abraham" syndrome)

a trend that seems to downplay the value and importance of Christian education.

our devotion to the Word

and not building genuine relationships with the members

lack of getting teens and college people into responsibility and lack of using their talents and gifts (they want to do things and be involved in church - not just sit in church - they want to do, not to listen (go figure))

commitment of too many financial resources to things other than outreach

the downplaying of the ongoing important role of Parish Services.

Lack Synodical leadership like that of Christ and Paul

Lack of concern that number one above is a major problem

inability or unwillingness to practice Biblical principles of fellowship.

the pressures of the world and our own sinful flesh

Losing our focus of proclaiming the gospel.

the average Bible study attendance of our congregations.

A focus on saving synodical institutions more than empowering individual members

the very American attitude of forgetting the history of the Church in favor of the trendy and new, which aren't always beneficial for the health of the synod.

old administration: (1) lazy or timid DPs who refuse to promote solid Lutheran doctrine and practice and (2) the damage done by the previous administration with its church growth sycophants,

e.g. "every member a minister"

mistrust among clergy and unwillingness to seek personal growth

synodical leaders are more worried about their pay scale than about leading the synod

Complete this sentence: "The two things that most worry me about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

Synodical leaders who have lost sight of what it means to be in a small struggling congregation.

disinterest in doctrinal papers: "Who wants to sit and have someone read a paper to you?"

lack of spiritual depth in members

Called Workers not growing through personal/corporate bible study

those who believe that programs are the way to draw people into a church (i.e. different worship styles, church carnivals, etc.)

our congregations seem to be becoming more independant

placing the focus of ministry on the budget over and above the true focus of preaching God's Word (which essentially is free).

general apathy of people towards religion is eroding the health of our synod

the influence of a non-Christian world view in public education, in almost all forms of media, etc.

Dismanteling of our worker training system

loss of doctrinal commitment among future pastors

church growth movement's de-emphasis on the Means of Grace that tempt members to seek worldly methods for growth over God's Word and sacraments

the confusion of the institutional church with the body of Christ

Addendum #6 – Survey Results

Answers to Question #6:

Complete this sentence: "The two things which give me the most confidence about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

Continued emphasis on the Word.

Christ is the Head of our church and that is clear in doctrine and practice

Doctrinal purity.

We focus on the means of grace.

our firm foundation in God's Word

our commitment to the truth and purity of God's word

God has still allowed us to retain the pure Word, which is the only thing that works

MLC, WLS

The means of grace are still valued, pure and practiced among us.

Honestly, I don't have much confidence about the spiritual health of our Synod as a whole. I see individual healthy congregations here and there. Until such congregations become models and not targets, I don't see them contributing much to the overall health of the Synod.

We still have the Means of Grace

faithfulness to God's Word.

we have lots of good hearted, spiritual people

devotion to the Word of God

The training the pastors receive in preparation for their ministries.

Pastors who still care and will speak up

the delegates of the synod recognizing the most important issues - education and mission.

Our faithful God.

that God has preserved His pure Word in our congregations

the training received at our synod schools.

Strong commitment to called worker training.

God's awesome power

God's Word

The means of grace are still the core of our doctrine

The leaders I know, DP's, Synod Pres, Circuit Pastors, are in their Bibles and strive to approach everything from a Biblical perspective.

our love for God and all of His Word.

The excellent and focused teaching that takes place in Min Ed schools and ALHS and LES

Pastors who are willing to work and share the Gospel.

doctrinally sound pastorate

That God has kept us faithful to his word and will continue to use our synod to be his clear witness to proclaim his truth and produce workers to do so in this world.

President Schroeder's servant leadership and commitment to Gospel ministry

Pres. Schroeder

we preach sin and grace

God's promises

The Means of Grace

Our confessional stance on Scripture

we have the gospel in Word and Sacrament and it is the power to forgive and to sanctify

our Savior is still our Savior

we hold to the truth of scripture and the Lutheran Confessions

called workers receive a thorough training in the Scriptures

new leadership in milwaukee

the commitment to God's word

caliber of our leaders' doctrinal training

God's promise that his Word will not come back to him empty (our labors are not in vain)

the fact that we continue to remain faithful to the Scriptures

Complete this sentence: "The two things which give me the most confidence about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

We still have a solid foundation in God's Word and our focus is still strongly directed toward law and gospel in all our teaching and preaching.

God works through his powerful word in spite of the jars of clay who proclaim it

we still have a solid commitment to God's word as his truth in its entirety

the Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which make the devil quake.

We are still here after 150 years

God is faithful

dedication of God-blessed individuals in our synod schools and God's promise to work in them

we have the pure Gospel

our hermeneutical principles

the doctrinal integrity of our pastorate.

We have the Word

Our new synodical leadership

the word is preached

Our new leadership seems to get it

high regard for the Word, written and preached

Doctrine we hold

... doctrinal purity and unity.

Our standing firm on God's Word

orthodoxy

Superb worker training system grounded firmly in God's Word

Solid training of pastors and teachers

the many who are in the Word and are on fire for kingdom work

our called worker training system.

We have God's pure word.

adherence to the Word

undying dedication to the proclamation of the gospel

we hold to the Scriptures.

The incredible doctrinal unity we maintain as a synod by God's grace

We are grounded in God's Word

We remain committed to proclaiming a living Savior...

our solid confessional Lutheran heritage - 9 traditional Lutheran Confessions

our foundation on the pure Word of God

proclamation of grace

solid law/gospel preachers

We still have been blessed with a strong Seminary

doctrinal purity

excellent training of delivering God's Word pastors and teachers are receiving in our synodical schools

We have the powerful Word of God in it's truth and purity.

Love for the Word.

biblically sound teaching.

God's promises that he is with his people

we have a sound foundation on the inerrant Word of God, which is our strength in facing whatever challenges to ministry

Renewed focus of leaders (esp Pres)

the grace of God

the efforts of NPH to produce a large number and wide variety of books from which our lay people can grow in their faith and understanding of God's Word as it relates to the world around them.

our complete dedication to God and his Word

that people see the problem

our strong ministerial educational system.

God's promises about the use of the Gospel

our worker training system, especially WLS, producing candidates for ministry who are still truly Lutheran

a worker training system that is 2nd to none.

Complete this sentence: "The two things which give me the most confidence about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

Faithful to God's Word

the positive direction of the last three conventions

renewed leadership with President Schroeder.

convention delegates united behind God-pleasing goals

Our commitment to Scripture and Confessions

Jesus forgives us.

Our focus on the original languages in MLC/Seminary

The last 3 Conventions emphasizing education and ministry to souls.

Very good worker-training schools for gospel ministry

we are heading back into a good check and balance system of having 3 governing boards.

absolute reliance upon the pure Word of God

we still preach the gospel and administer the sacraments according to Christ's command.

our strong commitment to faithfully proclaiming God's Word.

the doctrinal unity and training of our called workers

the current leadership that upholds the balance of synodical priorities- training workers and sending them out

The WELS' strong emphasis on the Means of Grace

The truth of God's Word that we are privileged to have and proclaim

our synod schools.

Jesus has given us the means of grace.

firm stance on the Word

the excellent and in-depth Biblical training our pastors and teachers receive.

there are faithful men and women who are asking the difficult questions and working hard for their Lord driven by the Gospel.

Confessional Lutheran leadership

a general lack of doctrinal controversy or disagreement

the presence of the Spirit in Word and sacrament.

The commitment to God's Word by both pastors and lay members

our commitment to sound doctrine

doctrinal heritage and unity

a pastorate well-instructed in the Scriptures (both exegetically and doctrinally) and trained to preach and teach that message with love for God's people and the lost.

Faithful and humble leaders.

our public stand on the truth of God's Word

Purity of Doctrine

that we are doctrinally sound.

President Schroeder's strong emphasis on Confessional Lutheranism

Good leadership

The pure Gospel we have been blessed with

the maturity and giftedness of the pastoral track faculty at MLC and the highly talented faculty at WLS.

a clear & correct teaching of the law/gospel and God's Word

our outstanding worker-training system which prepares called workers grounded in the Word

The new leadership seems to be directing our synod in the right direction.

still have a little commitment to Missions

our foundation on the Word of God.

love for mission work.

the fact that the gospel is still richly in our midst - the gentle shower as Luther called it has not passed us by.

That we, by the grace of God, are founded on Scripture alone and are still willing to move forward with that understanding.

The means of grace

purity of doctrine and practice

1. We still have the truth of the Gospel being proclaimed which can will strengthen God's people.

The quality of the young men coming out of our Seminary

the training behind the pastoral ministry; and

Getting pastors more involved with synodical decisions

Complete this sentence: "The two things which give me the most confidence about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

leadership

God's abundant provision of grace

Our Lord's divine plan carries on

faithfulness to God's Word in our post-modern culture

the commitment to a solid doctrinal education for our teachers and pastors.

by God's grace, we still have the Word in its truth and purity

that we place a premium on the means of grace and

We have not yet abandoned Greek as Hebrew training as a requirement for our pastors

its devotion to Scripture as the Word of God

devotion to God's Word

A solid conviction by our pastors to the truth

God's Word does not return to Him empty.

Christ's amazing grace, despite our sins

God's Word

Faithful teaching of the Word and use of the sacraments.

our synod's president's emphasis on our confessional Lutheran identity.

our pastors' love for the Word

the knowledge of God's Word

Leaders who rise above the Baby boomer mentality and become good Christian leaders

faithfulness to the Word

the language training that our pastors receive at a collegiate and seminary level.

Trust in God's Word

Jesus is our eternal shepherd holding us every moment of every day

synodical leaders who are faithful to God's Word.

our Lord Jesus Christ is still proclaimed as Savior

The Lord's unchanging grace and unchanging Word.

God's promises to accompany those who reach out with the Gospel.

A passion to adhere to God's Word

the continued strong emphasis on the Word and Sacraments among most called workers and congregations.

that the doctrine of vocation is reemerging in our circles

thorough training of our men at the seminary

Faithful lay leaders

God's promises to bless the preaching of His Word

our confessionalism

synodical schools

High view of Scripture

the true Gospel in Word & Sacraments

our regular return to the Bible for our guidance

the true and inerrant Word of God.

we are still maintaining our foundation on God's Word

We're concerned about spiritual health based on getting people into the Bible and Bible study and we keep doing things to try and achieve that goal.

Commitment to Scripture

the foundation on the Bible as the Word of God

the thorough grounding of our pastors in the original languages of the Bible

in most areas, we preach the Word of God in its truth and purity

The dedication and focus of our called workers.

people continue to have the opportunity through church and schools to be regularly exposed to the Means of Grace- the place the Spirit promises to work to his end and the glory of our triune God! Amen!

I know that God will provide as we faithfully use our gifts.

We have well-trained pastors.

God's promise to bless our efforts in his name

our willingness to use honest self-examination

Complete this sentence: "The two things which give me the most confidence about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

We continue to stand strong on that Word, in the face of pressure to adapt to mankind's changing view of sin and lifestyle there seems to be more of a "soul-based" approach among more recent WLS graduates -- rather than just "doing what the rules say".

There is a desire of many members to know and serve Jesus more.

Our called workers have a solid biblical foundation. If we would only build on that more wisely!

We still have law and gospel ministry, although sometimes we can be guilty of being legalistic Pharisees emphasis on Christian Education.

we are learning lessons now to prosper us later

an excellent worker training system

God continues to bless us despite ourselves.

Lay people who still care and will speak up

the training our young pastors and teachers receive at our schools is and has been top notch.

Our love for the Word.

our pastoral training system.

our unwavering steadfastness to teaching and preaching the purity of God's Word.

God's still in charge.

called worker training

Our desire to remain faithful to the Word

Law and Gospel are still faithfully preached in the majority of our pulpits.

By God's grace we can still make difficult decisions without causing a split in the Synod.

our love for all people.

The example set by many pastors whose attitude and approach to ministry is both Christ centered and POSITIVE

some leaders who have the vision to share the Gospel with the world.

emphasis on Christian education

Leaders patiently and encouraging congregations to think outside beyond local

the 2009 Synod Convention's decision to promote our core ministry as missions and preparing future called workers.

The bible-studies approved by convention

we proclaim the gospel as an essential fruit of faith of who we are as God's people

MLC & WLS (I hope they are staying strong).

Our Lord & Savior

Our commitment to training thoroughly Scriptural, confessional Gospel ministers

we stress the importance of pastor and people working together to examine church life and offer ways to improve

His Word works

our ministerial education schools and WLC

God promises that His Word will accomplish His purpose.

convention commitment to goals of mission and pastoral education system

the training of our clergy

it's still Christ's church

our faithfulness to God's Word and Sacraments

and we still believe and confess that the means of grace are the only tools for spiritual growth.

The young pastors I've come to know are well-trained, doctrinally sound, and eager to reach out with the truth.

Our schools continue to, in the wide view, continue to send out well-trained and eager workers into the Harvest field

there are a few who among us who are changing our unhealthy culture

our godly leadership, under the reign of the Lamb.

Small group of capable leaders

a convention recommitted to our core work

reliance on Scripture to provide the strength we need - God's good timing

we have the sacraments

the love and respect that exists in most (not all) of the brotherhood of pastors

the willingness to talk about healthy congregations at the symposium.

We are willing to talk about the issue

maintaining our solid 3 tier / 4 school educational system.

the sacraments are offered

Complete this sentence: "The two things which give me the most confidence about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

Many in the trenches are still struggling by using Law and Gospel

sacramental focus

Willingness of pastors/synod leaders to stand on that doctrine

... we continue to focus on what is most important--gospel outreach and spiritual growth, including worker training.

Outreach minded

trust in Word to work

Tom Kock (OK - just wanted to get a smile) - watching the convention and seeing godly men savoring God's Word and acting in godly ways.

Efficacy of Word and Sacrament when used properly

the pastors/leaders who are working to refocus their congregations on the mission of the church

the truth of the Gospel.

We make faithful use of the means of grace.

dedicated leaders

doctrinal purity

we hold to the Confessions.

The positive aspect of church fellowship which we enjoy

We have a fine school system

even though we think we have to make things successful God is in control

our willingness to encourage serious individual Bible study

the encouraging work being done in our world and home mission fields

dedication to education in every form

preschool ministry

We are working on funding our synod based on God's blessings rather than as a "business"

Worker training and mission focus

renewed emphasis to membership to immerse themselves in the use of the means of grace

Many leaders and lay-people who have been blessed by God with hearts that are filled with love for him.

Trust in the Sacraments.

emphasis on the power in the Means of Grace.

our strong ministerial education system

we have confidence that the Lord is in control and will guide the Church through the work of His faithful people

Faithfulness to Scripture

the efficacy of the Means of Grace

the conviction of our Synod in convention to countermand the direction of the Synodical Council and affirm the core ministries of our Synod.

that God will put us where he wants us, and bless us there (in other words, we are where God wants us to be)

that we KNOW where the answers to all of life's problems are

the promises of our loving and forgiving God.

The use of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament

the results of the past three Synod conventions

the large number of pastors who trust in and teach the efficacy of the Word.

Faithful pastors and teachers

the young men trained by the NWC faculty

our desire to strengthen the Circuit Pastor system.

the Biblical "soundness" of our ministerial training

Our brotherly and sisterly love among the spiritually mature

The Holy Spirit is alive and well in our lives

Our consistent stand that the Bible is the Word of God

Leadership with confidence in God's Word and promises

The true Word of God

we have stopped comparing our selves to LCMS whenever we talk about changing our school system.

the solid doctrinal leadership of our district presidents, et al

we still hold to and profess the historic confessions of the church.

a clergy firmly grounded in the teaching of the Scriptures.

Complete this sentence: "The two things which give me the most confidence about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

the power of the gospel that is available to us

the laity which has expressed the same priorities

Our commitment to reach out with the Word

Good leadership

our mission work.

Jesus has given us himself.

called worker training system

the growing number of people, especially young, who want to read their Bibles and share Christ with others.

the promise that the Lord gives to us that he will never leave and that difficulties in his church make us rely on him all the more.

Mission/outreach enthusiasm

our ministerial education system.

a growing desire to share the gospel in creative ways

The sincerity of our pastors to the Word and the work

Our renewed efforts to promote better and more effective teaching among pastors.

the spiritually mature members

a broad desire to spread the Good News of Jesus.

a strong worker training system.

our trust in the Means of Grace

Missions are seen as a priority

that we know where the power to get more healthy is: the gospel.

a renewed focus in many circles on the efficacy of the Means of Grace

Renewed focus on the importance of the means of grace

The commitment to training workers, doing outreach, and nurturing God's people that is evident all over our synod.

the relative, though not in all cases, uniformity in doctrine and practice.

the job the seminary does of training its pastors...the younger generation of pastors seems to have a better focus on the mission of the church

Concern among our called workers and laity to retain the truth and purity of God's Word, by his grace

The quality training of our future called workers. The recent synod convention reaffirmed our goal of making ministerial ed. a high priority.

still trying to be orthodox

the strong fellowship we exercise with one another in brotherly love and based on truth.

commitment to training competent pastors and teachers.

the eagerness for the Lord's work of many of our younger called workers.

That we are part of the body of Christ, and that nothing in all creation can separate us from Christ's love. God is good and his love endures forever.

The promises of God

thorough training of called workers

2. Commitment by many to reach out to the lost

the quality of the pastor-track professors at MLC

the ability to teach on the basis of the Word!

The underlying love of our people for the spreading of the Gospel through real mission work

education

God's grace which he provides abundantly

the gospel is still honored (if not predominate) in our congregations

Growth of new spiritual leaders in the church

its longstanding commitment to God and his Word.

by God's grace, we are still able to train called workers to serve in the preaching and teaching ministry

we train our pastors and teachers very well.

God's gospel is a power of itself, and not dependent upon the WELS

its emphasis on the proclamation of Law and Gospel

quality of young pastors

A commitment to ministry and mission work by the synod but weakness in congregation

There people within our Synod who do want to grow and be equipped from the Word

Complete this sentence: "The two things which give me the most confidence about our spiritual health as a synod are ..."

the true Word is still present among us

strong leadership

it is God who is in control and not us.

our ministerial education system that is producing called workers committed to a Lutheran understanding of the power of the means of grace.

the young graduates I see leaving seminary for the harvest field

and clinging to truth of God's Word

Our continual study of the Word - furthering education on the part of called workers.

God's promises

it's "love" for the Word.

Doctrinal purity of our synod

We know, trust, teach and hold one another accountable to the phrase "Biblical inerrancy" and how it applies

Pastors are still growing in circuit and conference studies.

Faithful called workers

Hearing grassroots commitment to worker training and missions.

our striving to preach and teach God's Word purely.

Gospel centered ministry, carried out especially well by many congregations outside of the Midwest

a growing desire in our synod, especially among the laypeople, to maintain our confessional integrity, while trying to preserve the Gospel by proclaiming it to anyone and everyone no matter the culture, gender,

or background

that the Conference of Presidents is now in direct control of the Board of Parish Services and the new DPs are starting to encourage confessional Lutheran doctrine and practice

God's ability to work through (and in spite of) our frailty and weakness

solid focus on Christian education

Our leaders and our grassroots followers all have the same Savior, the same faith, and the same hope for heaven.

God's promise that his word and our prayers do not return empty

member support of synodical schools

Some faithful called workers who can inspire and lead others to be awesome examples of leadership for synod

the promise of the Holy Spirit to work through those means.

continued emphasis on the Word and Sacraments

the grace of God which works in spite of our weaknesses.

there are still many committed people who seek to unite to do God's work founded in Jesus Christ

that we have a God who said that with Him "nothing is impossible."

Strong worker training

keeping our worker-training program intact, in house

the grace and power of our Savior who promises to be with us always and bless his Word so that it will not return to him empty
our pastoral training, when used properly, drives us into the Word which alone cures all problems

Addendum #7 – “The Mission of the Church”

Below is a Bible Study used by the WELS School of Outreach.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Getting Started

- Consider two groups. One group is quite clear about its mission; the other group lacks a clear understanding of its mission. As you think about these two groups, what differences would you expect to see between these two groups?
- Of all the groups in the world, the church is the group which MOST needs to be clear about its mission. List at least two reasons why that would be the case.

Getting Into the Word: Read through the following and answer the questions below.

- Mark 10:43-45** The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.
- Deuteronomy 32: 46-47** Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you—they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.
- 1Peter 2:2-3** Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.
- Mark 16:16** Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.
- John 10:16** I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.
- Psalms 96:9** Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.
- 2 Peter 3:17-18** Be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
- Matthew 28:18-20** All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.
- Acts 1:8** You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.
- John 4:35** Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.

1. Consider the previous passages. What does God say to us about ...
 - **WHAT** our mission is:

- The **IMPORTANCE and URGENCY** of that mission:
- The **PASSION** with which that mission is to be carried out:

Applying it:

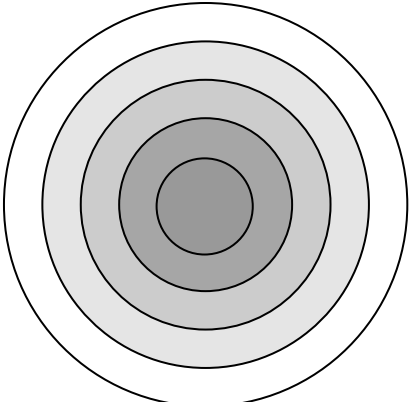
1. There are different ways to think about it, but perhaps a simple definition of the mission of the church is that “God wants us to **grow** in his Word and **go** with his Word.” Using that definition, think about ...
 - ... yourself.
 - ... your family.
 - ... your congregation.

If each of those three was completely focused on the mission which God has given to us, what positive differences would you find? (List at least two for each.)

2. Consider Ephesians 5:15-16
Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.

For what reasons do we need a reminder like this? And, how does a passage like this fit in a study of the Mission of the Church?

3. **What's Important?** If you're a target shooter, you want to hit the bull's eye. We want to do the same with our ministry. Knowing what God says about the mission of the church allows a congregation to focus. When faced with ministry options/opportunities, the mission of the church allows us to ask, “Is this a bull's eye, and therefore something we definitely want to do? Or isn't it?” In the list below, some are “bull's eyes”, others are things which lie further to the outside of the target's center. Some may be things we shouldn't do at all! Put each number on the target in the place where you think it fits.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Having a mid-week Bible Study for adults 2. Organizing a men's/women's group 3. Buying uniforms for a team in the city's Little League 4. Helping to fund a WELS missionary to a foreign country 5. Building a house for a poor family 6. Having a choir 7. Offering marriage/parenting seminars 8. Training families how to do home devotions 9. Operating a school in order to train future pastors and teachers 10. Having a seminar on the views of candidates running for political office 11. Offering regular Bible Instruction Classes 12. Sending mass mailings to invite people to come for worship 13. Taking donations to help a family pay off high medical bills 14. Having Sunday School and Bible Classes for all age groups 15. Having a congregational Christmas party 	
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4. Brainstorm. The Bible is full of good news, and God wants all of it shared with others! Which three Bible segments (either accounts or truths) would you really like to share with others? (You have to choose at least one Old Testament account.) Why did you choose the ones you chose?
- a)
 - b)
 - c)
5. We need to be constantly reminded of the mission of the church, that we're here to grow in the Word and go with the Word. If we're not mission-of-the-church guided, we will probably struggle with issues of unity, with purpose, with being confident in knowing that we're doing what God wants us to be doing. By contrast, when we're guided by what God tells us in the Word concerning our mission, we'll be blessed with greater unity, with more clear purpose, etc. Consider each of the following:
- ⇒ Come up with one strength which your congregation has when it comes to the mission of the church. How can you build on that?
 - ⇒ Come up with one weakness which your congregation has when it comes to the mission of the church. Do you have any ideas as to how you might address it? How do you think the School of Outreach might help you to address it?

For Further Discussion or Reflection:

- Share stories of people and congregations whose lives displayed a passionate focus on Christ's mission.
- When was the last time your congregation studied the mission of the church? For what reasons might it be valuable to spend some time studying it every year?
- Look at the personal focus of your time, finances, and energy. Intentionally rearrange your life to reflect a noticeable focus on your mission.
- Congregational atmosphere: Think through what you are consciously/unconsciously saying to others about the mission of the church with your communication, use of time and energy, and arrangement of finances. Is it consistent with what the Bible teaches? Or do changes need to be made?
- Outreach readiness: What are the people in your church's community like? Are your members focused on ways to reach them – both as a congregation and as individuals? What might need to happen so that you can better understand the mission field in which you're located?
- Think about different organizations in the church. (i.e. men's group, the church softball team, etc.) Are they "mission of the church" focused? What elements in those ministries let "outsiders" know you are eager to welcome them in so that they can come to know Jesus (better)?

Addendum #8 – An Example of a Worship Order

This is an example of a liturgical worship order, using variety within the form.
Note – much formatting has been deleted for the sake of space.

The Tree of Life

First Sunday After Christmas

December 29, 2002

Welcome! Merry Christmas! We continue our celebration of Jesus' birth this morning – we pray that we will be led to see Jesus even more clearly! The worship order is printed in this service folder – you'll find it to be straightforward, dignified and uplifting. Your little ones are welcome to stay with you, but if you prefer or should they become unable to sit any longer, a nursery is located down the hallway off the lobby. (The rest rooms are there, too.) Blessings on your worship!

Today's Focus: Today we conclude our "Trees of Christmas" theme. During Advent we saw promises of the Savior, promises which were fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus. Today we focus on the result of those fulfilled promises – that we will enter heaven, will spend eternity with Jesus, will get to eat from the Tree of Life! Glory to God in the highest! His favor rests upon us! What a perfect thought to lead us into a new year!

Serving the Lord and Us: Ushers: Joel VanRyn and Al Sonnenburg; Organist: Beth Kock; Nursery: Suzanne Rogers

Silent Prayer: O God, we see such a limited period of time; You see all of history at a glance. Forgive us for our failures to see our smallness, for our failures to appreciate Your grandeur. As we consider Your work throughout history, fill us with the confidence that You rule all things for the good of Your people, that we might enter the new year with joy, with peace, and with zeal to spread Your saving Word, focused on the Tree of Life. Bless our worship, O eternal God! Amen.

A Call to Worship our Newborn Savior

Minister: My soul glorifies the Lord!

Congregation: My spirit rejoices in God my Savior!

M: He has been mindful of the humble state of His servants.

C: From now on, all generations will call us blessed.

M: The Mighty One has done great things for us – Holy is His name!

C: His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation!

M: O Come, let us worship the newborn Savior!

C: Let us shout aloud to the Rock of our Salvation!

(sung) **Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all you nations rise, Join the triumph of the skies;
With th' angelic host proclaim, "Christ is born in Bethlehem!"**

Hark! The herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King!”

M: Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come and redeemed His people!

C: He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David.

M: He promised it long ago, through His holy prophets, that He would save us from our enemies, from the hand of all who hate us.

C: He has shown mercy to our fathers, and has remembered His holy covenant, the oath He swore to our father Abraham.

M: Because of the tender mercy of our God, Jesus – the rising Sun – has come to us from heaven and has shined upon us who were living in the darkness of sin.

C: He has come to give us the knowledge of salvation, through the forgiveness of our sins.

M: O Come, let us worship the newborn Savior!

C: Let us shout aloud to the Rock of our Salvation!

**What child is this who, laid to rest, On Mary’s lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet While shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ, the King, Whom shepherds guard and angels sing.
Haste, haste to bring Him laud, The babe, the Son of Mary!**

**Why lies He in such mean estate Where oxen now are feeding?
Good Christians fear; For sinners here The silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through; The cross He’ll bear for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh, The babe, the Son of Mary!**

M: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

C: He was with God in the beginning. All things were made through Him!

M: The Son is the radiance of God’s glory.

C: He is the exact representation of His being!

M: He came to this earth to provide purification for the sins of us people.

C: Now He sits at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven!

M: O Come, let us worship the newborn Savior!

C: Let us shout aloud to the Rock of our Salvation!

**Christ, by highest heav’n adored, Christ, the everlasting Lord,
Late in time behold him come, Offspring of a virgin’s womb.
Veiled in flesh the God-head see, Hail th’ incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with us to dwell, Jesus, our Immanuel!
Hark! The herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King!”**

Prayer of the Day: Eternal Father, before whom all times and seasons rise and fall, teach us to think earnestly on the shortness of our lives and on the immensity of your grace. Teach us to number our days aright, that we might apply our hearts to wisdom. Lead us to enter this new year trusting in the name of your Son and walking in His peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever..

**Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room And heav’n and nature sing, ...**

**Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns! Let all their songs employ,
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains Repeat the sounding joy, ...**

We Listen to God's Eternal Word

First Reading: Genesis 3:21-24 NIV

"The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. ²²And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." ²³So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. ²⁴After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life."

Hymn #40 (vv1,3-4) "O Jesus Christ, Your Manger Is"

Second Reading: Luke 2:25-32 NIV

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: ²⁹"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. ³⁰For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the sight of all people, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.""

Confession of Faith: The First Article of the Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

What does this mean?

I believe that God made me and every creature, and that He gave me my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members, my mind and all my abilities.

And I believe that God still preserves me by richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, cattle and all I own, and all that I need to keep my body and life, and by defending me against all danger and guarding and protecting me from all evil.

All this God does because He is my good and merciful Father in heaven, and not because I have earned or deserved it. For all this I ought to thank and praise, to serve and obey Him.

This is most certainly true.

Hymn of the Day: #417 "I'm But a Stranger Here"

(Children ages 4-10 may come to the front during verse 3 for the children's message)

Sermon: Revelation 22:1-6 NIV

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month.

And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. ⁶The angel said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place."

We Respond to God's Eternal Love

Hymn #441 (verses 1,4,6) "O God our Help in Ages Past"

The Offering (The members of Living Word have joined together to spread God's message both in this community and around the world. If you are a visitor, please do not feel obligated to participate in the offering. You are our guests, and we thank you for giving us the opportunity to share God's Word with you!)

Prayer of the Church

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Blessing: The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.
The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace.
C: (sung) **Amen. Amen. Amen.**

Closing Hymn: # 50 "Once In Royal David's City"

(After the closing hymn there will be a moment for silent prayer and reflection. Our ushers will then distribute the Friendship Registers. Please note the names of the people sitting near you!)

Addendum #9 – An Example Of a Sermon Preaching Gospel-empowered Sanctification

(Particularly the second part illustrates the point. Obviously the writing isn't meant for publication, but the point hopefully comes through.)

Sermon Confirmation May 18, 2008

Text: Ephesians 2:8-10

Theme: Grow In Grace From this Day Forward

- I. Grace That makes Good Works Irrelevant For Your Salvation.
- II. Grace That Makes Good Works Abundant For Your Life of Service.

Intro: My dear confirmands, I have a question for you. What is the greatest danger to our Christian faith? Just think about that for a moment. What poses the greatest danger to our faith and our salvation? There are many dangers to our faith out there. I was watching a Disney show yesterday and it was so subtle – as I laughed and got into the show I almost over looked it but then it jumped right out at me – I was laughing at something that was sinful. I was approving of the sin for a moment there as I snickered. In Romans 1 it pronounces judgment on those who approve of others who sin boldly. I would say that approving of others who sin boldly is a major temptation for everyone of us Americans because the standard fare for our minds on TV is Desperate Housewives or Lost or Survivor or CSI or Sex in the City or whatever right? Now I ask you, are bad TV shows the greatest threat to our faith? No.

Maybe greed – Smart Money magazine, the salaries of professional athletes, the temptation to want more and more – is greed the biggest threat? It is a threat but not the biggest – What is the biggest threat? For us Christians and especially for you Christians who are getting confirmed today – the greatest threat is that – we have made you study so hard and we have graded what you know and we have harped so much on what you are doing here today – confirming to us that you have faith – that for you – the greatest threat is that you would lose your salvation because of this one thought – you think you have saved yourself by learning, and reproducing knowledge of what you have learned – in short, by being good students you could feel you have earned a place in God's heart – if that were the case you are lost – Can you remember anywhere in Jesus ministry where he addressed this? In fact he talked about it all the time. Think of these: the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector – The Parable of the Vineyard – The Parable of the lost son – the lost coin – the lost sheep, - in all of these he was showing that we are saved by grace and not our works. Why did he talk so much against work righteousness? It was because he ministered to religious people. Religious people have a hard time not trusting in themselves and their own works to be saved. And here we are, we are religious people – who do a lot in our religion and we are so religious that we make our kids learn the basics and the quiz them on it and then we let them get confirmed and join the communicant membership. But God wants all of us to remember today that what we have learned is that we are saved by grace and not our own studies and grades in class. In order to keep us safe in salvation I have chosen three little passages from Paul in Ephesians for our sermon – I bet you can quote them – Ephesians 2:8-10– close your eyes and say them with me. Read text. – Why did Paul write these verses? It was because theirs was a good church. They were a busy, religious church and he wanted them to be safe in grace. He teaches us in these words that we are saved by grace. You know what that is - God's Riches at Christ's Expense. Jesus came, lived, died and rose again to save you and you had nothing to do with it. He did it because he loves you. That's grace.

I.

This is the crux of the Christian faith – you are here by grace –life is by grace – for instance, which of you asked to be born? None of you. But God gave you life and he also gave you Jesus, all by grace. – but then learning about Jesus and what he did is by grace – “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) I have

a dog named Wendy- I think she is pretty happy - she gets on my nerves a lot – I was thinking the other day – What it would be like to be without her. I cannot send her away. She’s member of the family – I brought her in – picked her up at the restaurant – brought her home – and we named her (even gave her a legal name) we potty trained her – moved to a new house and took her with us – we buy food for her – get her shots , heartworm meds - make vacation plans for her - she had nothing to do with any of this and she still has nothing to do with it too – it is all by grace – And what I am saying is that to God – you are just like Wendy. God had you born into a family that made sure you learned about Jesus – made you go to school – made you memorize – made you come here over and over – gave you understanding – all by grace – not from yourselves – gift of God so no one should boast –

This makes any good works you would ever do irrelevant – don’t matter - see these papers with grades – they are worth nothing for your salvation. It is all by grace. Don’t ever forget that

Sometimes my dog, Wendy, drives me crazy – but I still love her – In the same way you will fail God – try as you may you will never be perfect – but he still loves you – he remembers how he had you in mind from eternity – he remembers your birth, baptism, your days at our feet – he has made plans for others to influence your faith – he knows what hurts he will let happen and he has planned how he will carry you through them – all by grace. So, you might worry – he would grow weary of you – he doesn’t grow weary of any of his children – he loves you in Christ and always will. Isn’t that wonderful – now that you know what Jesus did for you , how he made you, how he brought you to faith, plans to keep you – what will you do with it? – What you want to do for God.

II.

Do you want to forget him? Do you want to humiliate him? Do you want to embarrass him? No, you like to be a member of his family – you like God – you love God – you want to make him happy because you are new – that’s what Paul is saying in verse 10. “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10) So, why did God make you and bring you to faith? It wasn’t because you earned it! It wasn’t just so that you could be in heaven! He wanted there to be a light for him. Jesus is still the light of the world, but he shines his light through you and me. He has made you light by the gospel you have learned. Confirmation Day is a day to be deployed as the light of the world for Jesus.

Paul says here that he saved you and made you new so that you would do good things for him in your life here. Do you have a mom or dad? God wants you to be blessing to them. He has prepared you for it. Do you have a brother or sister? God wants you to bless them. Even if you have a brother who is hard to get along with – God has prepared you, of all the people in the world – to be his brother. He doesn’t want someone else to be the brother or sister you are. He wants you to do it and he has equipped you to do it by giving you his grace and forgiveness to share with your brother. Does someone around you need a friend? You are the one, he prepared in advance that you would be there – Do you know someone who doesn’t know any of these truths we have taught you? You are the one God wants to teach him. Are you interested in being a doctor, lawyer, an engineer, a teacher, a pastor, a whatever? God puts those desires in our hearts and he prepares us to pursue those dreams. So, chase your dreams to have an impact of his world with all the strength God has given you!

Do you remember how Jesus sent out his 11 disciples at the end of Matthew? He said, “Go and make disciples.” Peter could have stood up and said, “Jesus I always put my foot in my mouth, send someone else.” Thomas could have said, “Get someone else, I doubt too much.” James and John could have said, “We need to stay too close to the fishing boats.” But you know, Jesus sent them. He didn’t go looking for others. He sent those 11 (and others). And today he’s sending you. You are being deployed to make disciples.

Your parents and your church will be here to help you but in the word of god we have taught you, you already have all you need to do the good works God has prepared in advance for you to do. So, go and serve Jesus like crazy and see what good things you can create for him who gave himself for you! AMEN

21st Century Pastors Address Congregational Health: A Reaction

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[A Symposium on Congregational Health:
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, September 21, 2009]

“Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” Did the planning committee force Pastor Kock to tread on ground unnavigable even for angelic nimbleness? As subjective as the ground was toward which his assignment pointed, I give thanks to God for his courage to accept the challenge. As he acknowledged (3), there is wide latitude in this topic within which Confessional Lutherans can disagree as brothers. There is no divine top ten list of significant challenges to raising up healthy congregations in the 21st century, nor are we handed a one-size-fits-all approved list of ministry plans and methods with which to address those challenges. Yet, even as he trod on subjective ground, he approached the issue not with foolhardy carelessness but with a healthy dose of spiritual wisdom.

What I appreciated most was Pastor Kock’s conviction that what can guide us on this journey into congregational health is our GPS – our gospel positioning system. Those who live by God’s boundless grace in Jesus have nothing to fear from honest evaluation. He reminded us of that in the beginning, middle, and end of his essay.¹ No matter what challenge we uncover in ourselves or in our congregations, God’s grace is still “made perfect in [that] weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). God grant us a growing willingness in our ministerium (starting with me!) to do regular and careful evaluation of our ministry, including asking others to give us open and honest feedback.

My biggest concern with Pastor Kock’s paper is not with the paper itself, but with the dangers that exist in our hearts as we ponder it. This essay speaks powerful warnings to us when we are beginning to think that the health of the kingdom depends on our insights and acumen. Other portions address the opposite challenge: those times we think healthy theology replaces healthy work habits (Fred Craddock, *Preaching*, 153-154).

While Pastor Kock’s paper is not inspired, something Luther said about Scripture applies well to how we receive this paper. “It is not enough to simply look and see whether this is God’s Word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol 35, 170). The danger is always present that I close my ears to what I most heed to hear at any given moment (such willful deafness tends to be worsened by vigorous head nodding to what I’m convinced others need to hear).

How sedating, when tempted to be careless or lazy, to muse merrily about Luther and Amsdorf sharing a few Wittenberg beers (18), to blind myself to the danger of imitating Old Testament leaders who drank “wine by the bowlful” yet who did “not grieve over the ruin of Joseph” (Amos 6:6). Before offering a hearty “Here! Here!” to Luther’s toast to confidence in the Word, we do well first to consider the volumes upon volumes of his sermons, books, and letters in which he addressed issue after issue challenging the church of his day. It seems likely he knocked down a few warm ones - while God did his wonders – along with, not instead of, working hard in God’s vineyard (1 Cor 15:10).

When the health of my congregation is struggling because I have lost zeal like Luther’s for carrying out gospel ministry, then what I need is not someone to buy the next round. I need Pastor Kock to remind me: “If we’re not growing (or are even shrinking) because of unfaithfulness, because of shoddy handling of the Word, then we need to repent!” (4) Or again, “Instead of boldly, widely, energetically proclaiming the truths we hold so dear, have we hidden behind a ‘cloak of orthodoxy?’” (14)

At other times the ministry temptation bothering me is reversed! For all our orthodox sounding protestations about confidence in the means, does our running after one new ministry idea after another signal I’ve shifted my focus from means to me? At such times I may be tempted to pick up anything I can beg, borrow, or steal that seems to “work.”

At those times I need to hear the pointed warning Pastor Kock issued for those more enamored with the power of their methods rather than of God’s message. He reminded us that ministry methods have an uncanny

ability to drag along with them the theology that engendered them (19). The lack of Christ-centeredness in many Arminian authors (16-18) should give us pause. Remember, we are doing gospel ministry, not reconstituting potatoes. If we find ourselves repeatedly instructed to “just add gospel,” perhaps we should stop and think whether the recipe is defective from the beginning.

What am I saying? Is there a part of this essay that resonated with you immediately? Were you tempted to look down the roster of attendees for that conference brother whom you really wish were present to hear this? That may be the part of the essay least likely to benefit you at this moment. Am I only looking to confirm my predilections, or for the sake of eternal souls will I allow Pastor Kock to challenge me to do a careful ministry analysis?

This is the same concern I have for the ease the Internet has now given to virtually gather and organize the “likeminded” as we bemoan others not as “orthodox” or “innovative” as we. When it comes to promoting congregational health where God has called me, my best friend in my conference could very well be the guy I’m most tempted to pillory. And I may be his potential best friend too - if only we can both learn to speak the truth in love rather than chewing on each other. When I find myself wishing everyone in synod approached ministry just as I do, I try to picture a giant eyeball (1 Cor 12).

In closing allow a few random kudos and cautions from the perspective of this reader. When it comes to other ideas well worth careful pondering I would point to:

- Peppering our preaching with abstract theological shorthand thoroughly confuses visitors and induces further fog into the minds of the not-so-well initiated within the flock (13). Many well-worn statements about “the law’s fearfulness” and “the gospel’s beauty” communicate with no one. Truth be told? Those statements bore us too!
- Before boasting of being christocentric Lutherans, we do well to go home and actually consider whether fresh and thorough gospel is more than an empty boast. In research I recently completed on preaching in our midst, similar anecdotes (14) about gospel-less (or gospel-light) messages were repeated with uncomfortable frequency.
- Pastor Kock’s encouragement to turn loose the royal priesthood is critical for congregational health. As the church in Jerusalem came to understand the hard way (Acts 6), Word and Sacrament ministry is often the first casualty when all ministry or service must first pass through my office. Both aspects Pastor Kock mentioned are critical: helping God’s priests find the beauty of their high and holy calling in all God given vocations (not just evangelism or “church work”), and equipping them to carry out the specific calling of being God’s witnesses (whether in their personal lives, or in “part-time” representative ministry).

I would also speak a few cautions as I ponder this paper:

- Pastor Kock makes this statement about reading “Arminians”: “Frankly – and this is probably a bit too strong, but I’ll say it anyway – I think we’re mostly wasting our time when we read those books” (17). May I second his parenthetical thought? Certainly not everyone has been blessed with the same measure of discernment. Yet we would be wise to oppose any hint of arrogance that asserts that almost nothing worthy of our consideration comes from outside Lutheranism. Certainly outside sources are to be read with extra caution. But could Christ’s bride adapt a pattern from earthly brides: “Something old, something new, something borrowed, something ~~blue~~ true”? Nothing should rival our study of Scripture, and following that, the Confessions and the other writings of our “old” fathers who spoke law and gospel with timeless eloquence. But there are things “new,” also beyond our circles, that are worth reading to see what we can legitimately “borrow.” The key remains that we sift carefully for what is “true.”
- Pastor Kock’s footnote (22) urges us not to set up a false dichotomy between preparing sermons and Bible studies. Perhaps it would have been better not to suggest any competition. I have yet to bump

into the pastor whose thorough text study made him a boring Bible class teacher. Preparation time for both is critical. Time bandits aplenty do exist, but thorough text study is not typically among the most likely suspects!

- Turning loose the royal priesthood in the area of teaching (25) seemed to lack balance. In 2 Tim 2, the words “reliable” and “qualified” need to be taken seriously when asking others to teach in representative ministry. The essay’s implication that Paul urged many in Rome to become teachers sight unseen may overestimate what he means by “teaching one another” as well as underestimating how well Paul knew many in Rome. To say that Paul knew little or nothing about those in Rome seems to miss what Paul says he knew about their faith in 1:8 and the large number he greeted personally in chapter 16.
- My last concern is not with anything said, but with what I could not find mentioned anywhere. Curiously missing in the survey options, and absent also in the essay’s suggestions for congregational health, is any mention of reinvigorating patient yet persistent church discipline. We live in a tolerant age in which the courage to confront others about “spiritual and lifestyle preferences” is becoming rare. Even a quick read of the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation reveals how many of Jesus’ concerns for those congregations could be categorized under carelessness in church discipline. Allowing diseased fruit to rot on the vine seldom enhances vineyard health.

We thank God for your work, Pastor Kock. May the work his gospel inspired you to do, and the discussions done among brothers gathered here, raise a rich harvest for the kingdom!

¹ “We are the children of God, baptized into His name, fed with the Word and the Supper. Confident of our status, we’re able to take a serious look at ourselves, at our ministries, at the time in which we live, assessing our strengths and weaknesses, all the while knowing that we’re on the road to life eternal”(3).

“Living under that umbrella of forgiveness allows us – indeed compels us – to examine our faithfulness with the Word, both in standing firmly on it and in sharing it with others” (15).

“And so [armed with the treasure of God’s Word and Sacraments] we’re able to look at ourselves, to ask tough questions, to not stick our heads into the sand, but to recognize weaknesses, ‘sicknesses’” (31).