What is "divinely instituted" and what is "necessary" in regard to the public ministry?

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When Wisconsin and Missouri Synod theologians met to discuss the doctrine of church and ministry during the years 1915-1929, J. P. Koehler says "the real issue was the definition of the term 'institution' as applied to the church and the office of the ministry in their concrete form."[1]

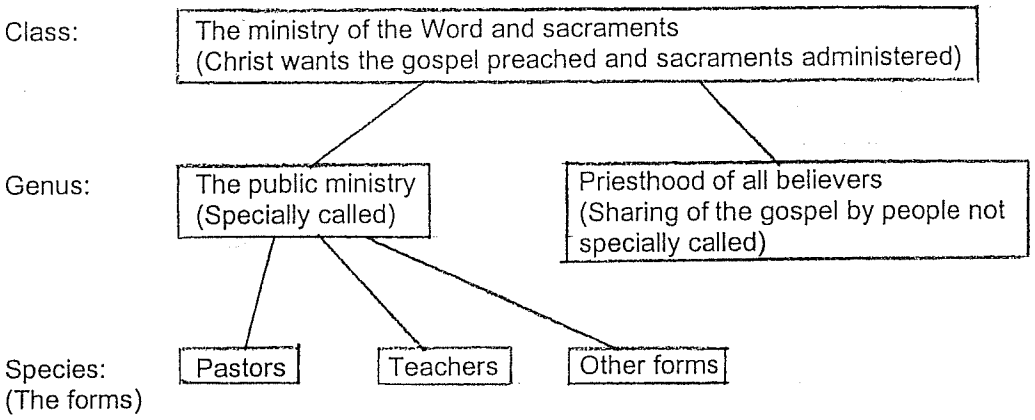
It strikes me that this is still involved in the discussions on the public ministry today. What do we mean when we say something is divinely instituted? Then, what exactly is divinely instituted? And as a result, what can be said to be necessary?

This paper will attempt to address these questions for the good of Christ's church. As with all of our work in the church, the author is simply trying his best to say something helpful and clarifying. The paper will offer two major suggestions. The author will welcome your reactions!

The standard terminology

As we begin, it may be good to review the standard terminology traditionally used in this discussion. Though we may not be enthralled with all of it, too much water has gone over the dam for us to start over.

In our circles, the discussion on the ministry has frequently made use of the following scheme. This scheme is not intended to imply that one level is derived from another. It simply shows the different types of ministry in an orderly taxonomy.



There is only one commission Christ has given the church: he wants the gospel shared through Word and sacrament. There are two ways in which this takes place. All individual Christians may share the gospel in their lives as Christians. In addition some Christians are specially called to share the gospel in an official capacity as workers in the church. Among the specially called ministers of the gospel, there may be different titles and offices.

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[1] John Philipp Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (St. Cloud, MN: Sentinel Publishing for the Protéstant Conference, 1970), 238.

The public ministry is divinely instituted.

It is a commonplace in WELS that the public ministry (the genus in the above diagram) is divinely instituted. The "People's Bible Teachings" book *Church—Mission—Ministry* states, "It is important to know that God himself instituted the public ministry for his church."[2] This point is articulated repeatedly and consistently in WELS publications, especially in recent years.

The Scriptural basis for the divine institution of the public ministry has been presented in various ways in WELS writing. Joel Fredrich finds three reasons why we can speak of the "necessity" of the called ministry.[3] First, "Christ himself not only conferred this office on some before his passion and taught that it would be in existence at his return, but he also solemnly established it on the day of his resurrection and perpetuates it from the right hand of the Father by giving ministers to the church."[4] Fredrich sees John 20:21-23 as the "great post-resurrection institution of the called ministry of the gospel—the genus, rather than any more specific form of it."[5] Secondly according to Fredrich, "Paul commands its continuation in a manner that does not betray a purely local or temporary concern."[6] The key passages are 2 Timothy 2:2 and Titus 1:5. Thirdly according to Fredrich, "Such necessity as the 'generic' called ministry has, corresponds to the nature of the church."[7] The church is a body in which the members have a variety of spiritual gifts. Since some individuals are given a special gift for teaching and others not, God obviously intends for the good of the church that some teach in a public ministry and others not.

Where there is room for discussion, however, is in regard to the specific forms of the public ministry. Although there is agreement on the doctrine, I believe there is some ambiguity in writings from our fellowship as to whether or not we should refer to the individual forms of the public ministry as divinely instituted. Let's go on.

Some in our fellowship have described all forms of public ministry as divinely instituted.

Some statements in writings from our fellowship imply that all the individual forms of the public ministry (the species in the above diagram) are also divinely instituted. First, one can note some statements from August Pieper. In his 1929 essay "Concerning the Doctrine of the Church and of Its Ministry, with Special Reference to the Synod and Its Discipline," Pieper writes:

> Not only the office of preaching in a local congregation or the parish ministry, but every form of the public preaching ministry which results from the external circumstances of the

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[2] Armin W. Schuetze *Church—Mission—Ministry* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1995), 99.
[3] Joel Fredrich, "The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry," presented at a pastors' conference in Chippewa Falls, WI on October 18, 1994 and revised on January 25, 1997, 29. This unpublished essay is the source of a number of key points in this paper.
[4] Ibid., 29.
[5] Ibid., 26.
[6] Ibid., 29.
[7] Ibid., 29.

> church, as, e.g., the Christian (and the synodical) office of a theological professor and other forms of it, is God's institution and establishment.[8]

In his 1917 essay "Luther's Doctrine of Church and Ministry," August Pieper finds these ideas in Luther:

> The essence of the public ministry consists in this (1) that it preaches God's Word and (2) that it preaches in behalf of the church. All offices in the church that have these two essential characteristics are of divine institution whatever they may be called: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, teachers, schoolmasters, missionaries, circuit preachers, presidents, visitors, professors; even doctors, such as Luther was, can take pride in the divine institution not of their title but of their office.[9]

In fairness to Pieper, however, it should be pointed out that he says the "office" or essence or work of the individual forms is divinely instituted, not the "title." He says the individual forms of the public ministry are divinely instituted only inasmuch as they are part of the divinely instituted ministry of the church. There is no command from God that institutes the various forms. Elsewhere Pieper writes:

> The ministry of the church has not only been earned by Christ, created by the Holy Spirit, but it has also been expressly commanded and ordained by the Lord; and all species and forms of this ministry self-evidently share in the divine institution of the genus, the ministry of the church. . . . But for no specific form of that ministry (the apostolate excepted) can a clear special prescription and ordinance of the Lord be established from Scripture.[10]

> Let us recognize that there is no divinely instituted and prescribed form of the ministry, even for the administration of Word and sacrament. . . . While the evangelical office of the ministry is of divine institution and is an express outward prescription and arrangement, the various forms of the ministry are not divinely instituted through an explicit regulation; but they are gifts of God, immediately and mediatedly given to the church.[11]

Another document that speaks of all the various offices of the public ministry as divinely instituted is the final draft of the ELS Doctrine Committee's proposed doctrinal statement "The Doctrine of the Public Ministry," which was defeated at the 2002 ELS convention. The final draft has an addendum that was attached after the ELS General Pastoral Conference on October 9-11, 2001. The addendum says:

> Is the pastoral office a divine institution? We would respond, yes, the pastoral office is a divine institution. There has never been any question about that. The real question for

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[8] August Pieper, "Concerning the Doctrine of the Church and of Its Ministry, with Special Reference to the Synod and Its Discipline," trans. Heinrich J. Vogel, *The Wauwatosa Theology,* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997), 115, previously published in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 59, no. 2 (April 1962).

[9] August Pieper, trans. Harold R. Johne, "Luther's Doctrine of Church and Ministry," *The Wauwatosa Theology*, 203-204, previously published in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (October 1963).

[10] August Pieper, "Are There Legal Regulations in the New Testament?" trans. Carl J. Lawrenz, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 43.

[11] Ibid., 49.

> us is this: Is the pastoral office the ***only*** divinely instituted office? Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12 speak of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers all given by God. There is a variety of divinely instituted offices mentioned in the New Testament, all of which belong to the God-given public ministry. Each office that fulfills God's command to use the means of grace in the stead of Christ and on behalf of the church is divinely instituted. The pastoral office is certainly a divine institution but so is the office of catechist, Lutheran elementary school teacher, and theological professor. All these offices are fulfilling God's command to have individuals use the means of grace in the stead of Christ and on behalf of the church, and therefore are forms of the divinely instituted public ministry.[12]

Peter Prange's essay, "Worship and Ministry: What of God and What of Men?", presented to the Cypress Pastoral Conference on September 17-18, 2001, also uses the phrase "divinely instituted" in a broad way. Prange says, "We must trust the gospel to produce its own God-given, divinely instituted forms, understanding that they are evangelical—and not legal—arrangements."[13] "It could also rightly be said that *every* form in the life of Christians is divinely instituted, insofar as those forms proceed from faith."[14]

What about the WELS "Theses on the Church and Ministry"?

Do the WELS "Theses on the Church and Ministry," adopted in 1969, imply that all the individual forms are divinely instituted? The key statement in this regard is the final antithesis:

> "We hold it to be untenable to say that the pastorate of the local congregation (*Pfarramt)* as a specific form of the public ministry is specifically instituted by the Lord in contrast to other forms of the public ministry."[15]

I wonder myself. Does this imply that all the forms are divinely instituted? In that case the antithesis is stating that it is wrong to say that only the pastoral office is divinely instituted, since all the other offices are also divinely instituted. Or does the antithesis imply that none of the forms are divinely instituted? In that case it would be wrong to say the pastoral office is divinely instituted and other offices are not, because none of the forms are divinely instituted.

I suspect one could read the antithesis in either way. Earlier the "Theses on the Church and Ministry" state that there is "no direct word of institution for any particular form of the public ministry. . . . The specific forms in which Christians establish the public ministry have not been prescribed by the Lord to His New Testament Church."[16] These statements may imply to the reader that none of the forms of the public ministry should be spoken of as divinely instituted. Yet

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[12] *85th Regular Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, 2002, 102.
[13] Peter M. Prange, "Worship and Ministry: What of God and What of Men?", presented to the Cypress Pastoral Conference, September 17-18, 2001, 13. This broad use of the expression "divinely institutued" is my only concern in an otherwise fine essay.
[14] Ibid., 18.
[15] *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 51.
[16] Ibid., 50.

the wording of the antithesis is very close to the wording of August Pieper in a paragraph where he spoke of every species, in a sense, as instituted by God. Pieper wrote:

> Luther speaks much about the divine institution of the local pastorate, but, on the one hand, it is clear from many passages that he does not declare this particular species, the local pastorate, to be divinely instituted in contrast to other species of the public preaching ministry or the ministry of the Word, but that rather he declares this species to be divine together with the other species. . . . He characterizes the other species of the public ministry (even the office of visitor, St. L. 17, p. 1155) as being instituted by God.[17]

In either case, however, the main point is still the same. Nothing should be said about divine institution of the pastoral office that is different from other forms of the public ministry. The pastoral office is not unique as a form of public ministry when it comes to divine institution.

The phrase "divinely instituted"

But this brings up the question: what exactly do we mean with the phrase "divinely instituted?"

Lingustically I suppose one could argue that the word "institute" can mean nothing more than "establish" or "bring into being." However, in our normal Lutheran church usage, I sense that "divinely instituted" generally means more. The phrase commonly is used to refer to something that is established by God for all people of all ages until the end of the world. It is used for something that is necessary, and not optional. Joel Fredrich writes, "When we speak of divine institutions, we ordinarily are talking about things that we are not free to ignore, alter, or terminate. . . . Ordinarily we designate as divinely instituted only things which are in some sense and some degree necessary."[18]

For example, we say that Baptism and the Lord's Supper are divinely instituted. They are to be a part of Christian life in all places and ages. We say that secular government is divinely instituted. God wants people everywhere to have rulers to preserve order. Likewise we say marriage is divinely instituted. Although not every individual becomes married, marriage is intended by God to be practiced among all cultures until the end of the world. On the other hand, we make a point of saying that confirmation and ordination are not divinely instituted. They are not required by God's Word for all people of all times.

This understanding of "divinely instituted" fits very well, of course, with the genus of the public ministry. When we say the public ministry is divinely instituted, we mean that God intends for there to be specially called ministers of the gospel in all places and ages. The church is not free to function without a public ministry. The public ministry is not optional; it is necessary.

But what about the species? This leads to my first suggestion.

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[17] August Pieper, "Luther's Doctrine of Church and Ministry," 201.
[18] Fredrich, "The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry," 9, 15.

Suggestion # 1 – Let's not say that the individual forms are divinely instituted.

I wonder if it isn't best to avoid the use of the phrase "divinely instituted" for all individual forms of the public ministry. We can very properly say the individual forms are gifts of God. God has raised them up and created them. But perhaps "divinely instituted" should be used for the genus only, and not for the species.

This way of speaking would avoid having us say things that sound contradictory. We are very quick to say, in the words of the WELS "Theses," that there is "no direct word of institution for any particular form of the public ministry."[19] Prof. John Brenner writes about our WELS forefathers, "They taught that God has instituted the public ministry, but he has not instituted any particular form of the ministry."[20] If we go on to say that in another sense the individual forms are divinely instituted—because God raised them up in history or because they are part of the genus—I am fearful it could lead to confusion, even if the expression were explained properly.

In addition, using the expression "divinely instituted" for the individual forms is hazardous if indeed it carries the connotation of "necessary for all people of all time." For example, if we say teachers and staff ministers are in offices that are divinely instituted, we may give the impression that all people in all places must have teachers and staff ministers. We run the risk of misunderstanding.

Finally, if the expression "divinely instituted" is broad enough to apply to individual forms like teachers and staff ministers because God has raised them up in the history of the church, I wonder why we couldn't use the term "divinely instituted" also for confirmation and ordination. Why, then, couldn't we refer to the historic liturgy as divinely instituted as well? We are more consistent in our use of the phrase "divinely instituted" if we do not use it for the individual forms of public ministry that originate among Christians in history without a direct command from God.

Analogy to secular government

Think of how we express ourselves with reference to secular government, where the same general situation prevails. We know that God has instituted secular government for all people of all time. "We believe that not only the church but also the state, that is, all governmental authority, has been instituted by God."[21]

Yet we know he has not instituted specific forms of government. Over the course of history, there have been countless forms, from kings and princes, to chieftains and elders, to mayors and presidents. To be sure, every individual in each form is "God's servant" (Romans 13:4). We know "there is no authority except that which God has established" (Romans 13:1).

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[19] *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS,* 50.
[20] John M. Brenner, "Forward in Christ: Doctrinal Challenges and Language Change," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 97, no. 3 (Summer, 2000): 169.
[21] *This We Believe,* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1999), 33.

Yet we wouldn't say that the office of president is divinely instituted. We wouldn't say the office of mayor is divinely instituted. We speak of the divine institution of the genus, not of the species.

The voice of J. P. Koehler

Curiously, similar care in the use of the word "institute" was recommended by J. P. Koehler. Koehler, of course, was the exegetical pioneer in the WELS church and ministry studies of the early 1900's. He himself, however, did not write extensively on the topic for reasons given in his *History of the Wisconsin Synod.*[22] He was busy with the seminary choir and the preparation of materials for his seminary history course.

In 1913, however, Koehler wrote a book review of Schaller's *Pastorale Praxis*. Here Koehler recommended that the word *gestiftet*, comparable to our word "instituted," not be used for individual forms of ministry. He considered *stiften* to be a solemn word that implies divine activity without any human element. He preferred to use the word *schaffen*, comparable to our word "create" or "produce," for the way in which God raises up specific forms of ministry in the course of human history. In making this suggestion he recognized that he was dealing simply with the form of expression, not with the substance.[23] He wrote:

> I would not say . . . God has **instituted** [*gestiftet*] the episcopate, the diaconate, the consistorial system, or the synods (all words taken in the abstract, general sense), because always the collateral idea of a limiting regulation creeps in, that operates with legalistic obligation. All these things have come about historically . . . I would let go of the word "institute" [*stiften*] here, so that it would not be used in a sense that is altogether too watered down.[24]

Similarly in his 1917 *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte*, Koehler shows a preference for the word *Schaffen* ("creating") rather than *Stiftung* ("institution") when speaking about the forms of the public ministry. He writes:

> The Wauwatosa faculty considers that the pastoral ministry [*Pfarramt*] is a species of the preaching ministry [*Predigtamt*] that first originated in the German Middle Ages, and that likewise the local congregation is a species of the concept of church. In both cases the faculty considers that when we use the word "institution" [*Stiftung*], it is not to be understood that God has distinguished these two species through a special decree over against other similar structures of Christian life and church life that also have been created [*geschaffen*] by the gospel. Rather the "institution" [*Stiftung*] is a divine creating [*Schaffen*] of the forms (pastorate, local congregation, synod, office of school teacher, office of professor, and others) through the working of the Holy Spirit in Christendom, when Christians in Christian freedom arrange these things according to the external circumstances.[25]

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[22] Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod,* 238.
[23] J. P. Koehler, Book review of *Pastorale Praxis*, *Theologische Quartalschrift* 10:4 (October 1913): 300.
[24] Ibid., 301-302.
[25] J. P. Koehler, *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1917), 712.

This doesn't detract from the dignity of public ministers.

Does it take away from our status as public ministers, if we understand that we are in a form of the ministry that is not divinely instituted? I think not, inasmuch as we still are part of the public ministry itself that is divinely instituted.

For example, what would I say if someone asked me if I serve in a calling that is divinely instituted? I probably would first ask him what he meant with the question. Undoubtedly then I would talk about how Christ established the public ministry, and I am a part of it. So yes, I am in a vocation that is divinely instituted. However, I would go on to point out that the Bible does not give any express command that there should be professors of Hebrew in the church. So the form or office of ministry in which I serve is not divinely instituted. The work and the essence of every office is divinely instituted, but the particular title and job description is not.

I suspect that for all of us who work in the public ministry, foremost in our minds is the fact that we are part of something that is divinely instituted. What drives us on day by day, is that we are doing the work of the Lord who saved us as part of the specially called ministry which we know he wants to continue until Judgment Day. It is only the outward form that is not divinely instituted.

However, if we are to be as precise as we can, we should point out that the genus is divinely instituted, but not the species. People in all forms of the public ministry are part of something divinely instituted because they are part of the public ministry. However, none of the individual forms as such are divinely instituted. And no one form may claim divine institution in opposition to any other.

What is necessary?

If the divine institution of something can be established, then its necessity follows automatically. Whatever is divinely instituted is necessary for all Christians of all time. Whatever is not divinely instituted is not necessary for all Christians of all time.

Consequently, in the realm of the ministry, we can say that the public ministry is necessary. God wants Christians everywhere to call some to serve them with Word and sacrament. No precise form is necessary, however, because God has not expressly instituted any particular office or form of ministry that must be established everywhere. Christians have freedom, under the guidance of God the Holy Spirit, to establish whatever forms serve to spread the gospel.

Some quote the Lutheran Confessions and our Lutheran forefathers to maintain that other things are necessary.

It is no secret that some Lutherans quote the Lutheran Confessions and our Lutheran forefathers to maintain that other things are necessary in regard to the public ministry. For

example, I have heard or read the following as conclusions drawn from the Lutheran Confessions and the Lutheran fathers:

> 1) It is necessary for public ministers to be entrusted with the full use of the means of grace; otherwise, one is not in the public ministry. Therefore only pastors are in the public ministry, not Christian day school teachers.[26]
> 2) It is necessary for public ministers to be male.[27]
> 3) It is necessary for public ministers to be ordained according to Augsburg Confession 14.[28]

In this matter, I will confess that I am a great lover of the Lutheran Confessions. My *Triglotta* is one of three books I have had to tape up or rebind because the binding broke through use. (The others are my English Bible and my Hebrew lexicon. I have loose-leaf Hebrew and Greek texts where the bindings can't be broken!)

I fear, however, that there is a desire here to prove more from the Confessions than they say. This debate about forms of ministry is a debate that developed after the writing of the Lutheran Confessions. It was not something that the writers of the Confessions intended to address. It is always problematic, after doctrinal controversy has raged on a topic, to expect documents written before the controversy to settle the issue. Certainly documents from previous generations need to be studied, and their light needs to be shed on current issues. But often people on both sides of a later controversy will claim that the previous documents support their view. This is exactly what is happening in regard to the Lutheran Confessions and the question of ministerial forms.

In the summer of 2001 I attended the LCMS convention in St. Louis as the WELS CICR observer. Throughout the six days of meetings there were issues that had the doctrine of church and ministry in the background. In the process I personally witnessed how different groups of well-meaning Lutherans who were self-consciously "confessional" had different understandings of Augsburg Confession 14 in regard to forms of ministry.[29] Their different understandings of AC 14 led them to promote different proposals for the synod. Some people argued on the basis of AC 14 that positions like "Directors of Family Life" should be called positions, with those who serve listed in the yearbook as "Commissioned Ministers" and not "Consecrated Lay Workers." They

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[26] ELS pastor Rolf Preus says this in essays posted on his web site (christforus.org): "The Teaching of the Synodical Conference on the Office of the Public Ministry" and "Did Jesus Institute the Pastoral Office?" A shocking article in *Logia* 11:2 (Eastertide 2002) by Mervyn Wagner entitled "Lutheran Schooling, Ten Theses and Some Antitheses" says that Christian day school teachers are not ministers of the church, but ministers of the government. They function under the law and the First Article, and are no different in vocation from public school teachers.
[27] Thomas L. Rank, newly elected member of the ELS Doctrine Committee, says this in a book review in *Logia* 11, no. 3 (Trinity 2002): 44-45.
[28] Eric R. Andrae, "Ministers Identified," *Logia* 10, no. 4 (Reformation 2001): 52.
[29] Article 14 says: "Concerning church order they [the churches among us] teach that no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called [*rite vocatus*]."

saw AC 14 as including a wide variety of forms of public ministry. Later, others argued on the basis of AC 14 that all deacons who serve in a Word and sacrament ministry need to be ordained. They understood the *rite vocatus* ["properly called"] as necessitating ordination.

As you may know, the 2001 LCMS convention also voted 791-291 to reaffirm Walther's book *The Voice of Our Church on the Question of Church and Ministry* from 1851 as the official position of LCMS. There are those in LCMS, and also in our fellowship,[30] who think that all we need do is to return to Walther to solve the current struggles on church and ministry. In response, however, one should read the essay "The Role of the Lutheran Teacher: C. F. W. Walther's Unsettled Legacy in Lutheran Education"[31] by Mary Hilgendorf. She argues that Walther left an "unsettled legacy" in regard to teachers. He considered them in a church office, he saw to it that they received divine calls, but he didn't clearly say they were in the public ministry, and he didn't involve them in the synod's work. According to Hilgendorf, it is debatable whether he meant to call the teaching office an "auxiliary" office or not. Maybe the word "auxiliary" was only for offices that didn't use the means of grace.[32] At any rate, all the issues that have come up in regard to the teaching office were not settled conclusively by Walther.

On the points about the ministry that the Lutheran Confessions intended to address, there should be no debate among Lutherans. The ministry involves spreading the gospel through Word and sacrament (AC 5). No one should set himself up in the public ministry, but rather one should be called (AC 14). The authority of public ministers is in spiritual matters, not civil (AC 28, Tractate). It is permissible for Lutherans to set up their own public ministry independent of the Roman Catholic system (SA 10, Tractate). If one doesn't hold to these items, one should find a different church and not claim to be a Lutheran.

However, the Confessions did not intend to address the questions about ministerial forms that surfaced in later years, such as the status of male and female school teachers. These were not the issues of their day. The reason the topic of ministerial forms has been an ongoing controversy among conservative Lutherans for almost two centuries, I believe, is precisely because the Lutheran Confessions don't spell everything out on this topic. If we could, it would be interesting to ask Martin Chemnitz in person how he would articulate the calling and the position in the public ministry of deaconesses who do some ministry with the Word. If we could explain to him the work of our women school teachers, what would he say? I don't know. Certainly, these great teachers still guide us. But we do a disservice to the confessors and to us if we assume that they will solve this current issue.

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[30] Rolf Preus, "The Teaching of the Synodical Conference on the Office of the Public Ministry."
[31] Mary Hilgendorf, "The Role of the Lutheran Teacher: C. F. W. Walther's Unsettled Legacy in Lutheran Education," *Lutheran Education* 135, no. 3 (January/February 2000).
[32] Ibid., 145-146.

Rather, we should perhaps use the confessions more than we do to give us a paradigm for how to proceed when new doctrinal controversies arise in the church. It is not just that the confessions give us the right answer (which of course they do on all topics they address), but they also show us how to act as Lutherans in similar times. When a new issue surfaces to trouble the church, Lutheran Christians are eager to study the Scriptures. Lutheran Christians work to articulate the doctrine in a way that says no more and no less than the Bible. Then after refining and refining, Lutheran Christians are eager to sign their name to the doctrine of God's Word and to confess it.

We need to be careful not to set up additional necessities in regard to the public ministry.

In regard to the public ministry, then, we need to be careful not to set up additional necessities. In his Word God has given us the gospel and instituted the public ministry. But he has given Christians the freedom to arrange for the pubic ministry according to their own circumstances. We trust the Holy Spirit working through the gospel to set up appropriate structures. We don't want to be legalistic.[33]

Specifically, we don't see in the Bible that the pastoral office is the one and only direct successor to the apostles. There are a variety of titles and offices in the New Testament, and none of them is said to be the direct successor to the apostles. We don't see in the Bible that a person must be entrusted with the full use of the means of grace in order to be in the public ministry. Without a doubt we see two distinct forms of public ministry in the early church, elders and deacons, and it is never said that all servants in the public ministry must be able to do everything. We don't see in the Bible that women are excluded from all positions of public ministry. There are many women active in the church's work, and there are hints at a deaconess-like office.

All this being said, however, I would still like to make the following suggestion.

Suggestion #2 – It is permissible to say that overseers or shepherds of some sort for local congregations are indispensable under normal circumstances.

I wonder if we couldn't go farther in WELS than we sometimes have, to say that some sort of shepherding or oversight position is indispensable for local congregations under normal circumstances. The local congregation still is the primary grouping of Christians in the church. It is the place where the means of grace are shared with individual Christians on a regular, ongoing basis. If God has divinely instituted the public ministry, one can naturally expect that the public ministry will show itself here in an office of shepherding and oversight.

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[33] These points are well articulated in Prange's essay, "Worship and Ministry: What of God and What of Men?"

If we say this, of course, we must allow for a suitable variety of forms. It is not that every congregation must have a "pastor." This title was certainly not used by many of the early Christian congregations. Also, one does not have to think in terms of only one leader or two or three. Some of the early Christian congregations seem to have been overseen by a council of elders.

To be sure, there also can be exceptional circumstances. What about a handful of isolated Christians in a strange place who happen to meet together for Bible reading and prayer? Certainly they could pick one to be the leader, who then would function in a form of public ministry. But any such group would still be "church" even though they would not have a "pastor" or a nicely organized public ministry or any public ministry at all. The public ministry is not an absolute necessity for the church of God to exist.

If we don't say that some sort of local shepherding office is more necessary than other forms of the public ministry, however, outsiders to WELS can get the impression that we put all forms of the public ministry on exactly the same level of importance. The criticism has been heard that in WELS a physical education professor or a planned gift counselor is just as necessary as a pastor.

You and I know, however, that this is not how we function in WELS. In WELS every congregation has a pastor. Many congregations do not have any other full-time offices of public ministry. It is the pastoral office that comes first when a church is organized, and it is the one office that is considered indispensable. If a congregation has one pastor and one staff minister, and the pastor accepts a call elsewhere, the congregation will call a vacancy pastor. The congregation will not assume that the staff minister will take over the pastoral duties. When the staff ministry program was established in WELS, it was very clearly articulated that staff ministers were expected to work under pastors and not to take over the work of pastors.[34] They are not trained to do a pastor's work.

Harold Wicke in a 1971 essay said, "We do, however, recognize that the primary form which the ministry will usually take is that of the congregational pastorate."[35] Even August Pieper, the great champion of the teaching that the public ministry has various forms, said about the pastoral ministry in a 1912 essay: "The parish ministry in the form familiar to us is the chief species, the most complete, most important, and most necessary species of the ecclesiastical ministry."[36]

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[34] *Reports and Memorials for the 51st Bienniel Convention of WELS*, 1991, 183.
[35] Harold Wicke, "Is the Pastorate in the Congregation the Only God-ordained Office in the Church?" *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly,* 68, no. 2 (April 1971): 120.
[36] August Pieper, "Zur Verständigung in der gegenwärtigen Diskussion über Kirche und Amt," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 9, no. 3 (Juli 1912), 204-205. The translation is from Joel Fredrich, "The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry," 40.

In keeping with our practice and our common understanding, then, I think we should be willing to say more boldly and confidently—with the proper disclaimers—that a shepherding office for local congregations is indispensable. It is indispensable not because the pastorate is divinely instituted. Rather it is indispensable because the most vital work of the church goes on in local congregations, and so the divinely instituted public ministry will inevitably show itself there. All the forms of public ministry are not equally necessary. A local shepherding office is more necessary than a Christian day school teacher or any other form.

In this regard, again, what we are saying about the public ministry of the church is comparable to secular government. Are all offices of secular government of equal necessity? Certainly not. A larger town may have a mayor (or some other overseer with some other title) and a city planner and a dogcatcher. A smaller town, if it only has one office, will not have a city planner or dogcatcher instead of a mayor. The overall oversight position comes first.

ELFK doctrinal statement

In September 2001, our sister synod in Germany, the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (*Evangelisch-Lutherische Freikirche* or ELFK), adopted some theses on church and ministry at a special convention. Their theses include the following paragraph:

> (B8) The term *Predigtamt* is customarily used in our church to describe the office of pastor. This use should continue. The pastor's office is the most comprehensive and fundamental form of the public ministry of proclamation. Full spiritual oversight over the flock of Christ is conferred on pastors in their local congregations. [*Ort*] (Proclamation of the Word, administration of the Sacraments, church discipline, care of souls, 1 Peter 5:2f)—Where there are, in addition to the pastoral office, other offices of the public ministry of proclamation in the congregation, the pastor bears the final responsibility [*Gesamtverantwortung*]. Because Christ wills to have responsible shepherds for His flock, such an office is indispensable. (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 20:28-31; Titus 1:6-9; 1 Peter 5:1-3; Hebrews 13:17) In the ministry of the pastoral office only suitable males may be called. (1 Timothy 3:1-7; 1 Corinthians 14:34f; 1 Timothy 2:12) Cf. Apol. 14,1[37]

Much of this paragraph is similar to our WELS *This We Believe*:

> We look upon the pastoral office as the most comprehensive form of the public ministry of the Word. Pastors are trained and called to provide such comprehensive spiritual oversight for the gathering and nurturing of souls in congregations (1 Peter 5:2)."[38]

This We Believe makes clear that this is our way of arranging things in WELS and not a binding, divine arrangement by saying "*We look upon* the pastoral office as . . . ." Certainly this is to be the understanding of the ELFK statement as well. It is the custom of their church to confer spiritual oversight to public ministers called "pastors."

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[37] Gaylin R. Schmeling, "A Brief History of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Germany Including Its Recent Ministry Discussion," *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (December 2002): 319.

[38] *This We Believe,* 30.

The Germans have an additional sentence, however, not represented in *This We Believe*. "Because Christ wills to have responsible shepherds for His flock, such an office is indispensable [*unverzichtbar*]." Shall we fault the Germans for this sentence? With the right explanation, I think not.

The conclusions

The public ministry (the genus) is divinely instituted. Therefore a public ministry of some sort is necessary by God's command for Christians throughout the ages.

The individual forms (the species) of the public ministry are not divinely instituted. Therefore no specific form is necessary by God's command. A shepherding office for local congregations, however, is more necessary than other forms of public ministry due to the fundamental importance of its work. Under normal circumstances one could say such an office is indispensable.