

The following memoir was written for pastors, but it has many reflections on the events already described in MY LIFE, especially in the first half.

STORYTIME WITH PROFESSOR BRUG

Missionaries Conference

Wisconsin Dells

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The Assignment

As I was beginning to enjoy the leisure of retirement, I was not planning on writing any new papers this fall until I got a phone call from Dave Scharf asking me to take up the topic “Storytime with Professor Brug.” That sounded intriguing and easy. So when I asked him, “You mean, all I gotta do is show up and tell stories for an hour or so?”, he said, “Well, no, not exactly. You have to write them all out, and most of the stories should have some sort of point to them.” That did not sound nearly as easy or interesting, but I decided to give it a go anyway.

As I reflected on what he was looking for, I realized that the topic was not “Storytime About Professor Brug” but “Storytime With Professor Brug.” This second topic hopefully would be more interesting than the first.

Since this is not a history conference but a ministry conference, all the stories were supposed to be about ministry. The stories are not intended to be about one particular minister or about ministers in general but about the holy ministry of the Word. More specifically, how do people inside the church and outside the church perceive the holy ministry? By remembering and thinking about their reactions to our ministry, can we learn valuable lessons to help us as we conduct our ministry?

A danger of this approach of reminiscing is that there is good evidence that our brain not only recalls stories from our past experience, but it also creates them or at least “improves” them with repeated telling. (That is one reason there is a statute of limitations on testifying against a crime.) If we were in a courtroom, I suppose this would make a significant difference how exact the memories are, but since the point of each of our stories today is the lesson that the event taught me about ministry, I suppose it does not matter so much how precisely my memory of the event would correspond with a video of the event, since the moral of the story, the lesson that stuck with me about the ministry, would be the same in either case. So if you recall hearing one or more of these stories in the seminary classroom, and the story now seems to be different than what you remember, it may be that you are not remembering it correctly. So let’s get started.

The Foundation

There is one misconception about ministry that we need to get rid of right off the bat. At a conference like this it is easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking about “ministry” mainly as something that we do. Or, not quite as bad, but still a faulty idea, we might think of ministry as something that we do together with the members whom we have trained to share the work of

ministry with us. There is perhaps more than a grain of truth in these two notions, but ministry is not first of all something we do, but something we receive. Ministry is something we experience.

I do not remember my first encounter with the ministry (I am pretty sure you do not either) but I do know something about it.

The year was 1945. The most horrible war in the sad, bloody history of this world was drawing closer to its end, but there was still much blood to be poured out. A young woman, a recent immigrant to the United States and a new Lutheran, was waiting for the birth of her first child in a remote corner of the California desert. After he was born, that baby's first experience with ministry came on March 4, 1945 when a strange man whom he had never met poured water on him and spoke words to him and about him and over him in a language he did not yet understand and to which he could not respond. All this happened with the baby's father 7000 miles away, island-hopping ever closer to the dreaded invasion of Japan that was expected to cost millions of lives. His mother had the hope, but no certainty, that that the man she loved, her son's father, would ever return home again to see his son.

This encounter with ministry happened in the middle of the California desert, in a church I do not remember, 2000 miles away from our family home, in a synod I have never belonged too. I do not remember any of this, but I have a piece of paper in my desk that says that it happened.

This piece of paper says that John Frederick Brug was baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost on the fourth day of March, 1945, at Grace Lutheran Church in Needles, California, by Pastor Ronald R. Ross. Though I remember none of this, this encounter with ministry still shapes and determines who I am 75 years later. It was my first experience of the truth of the ministry: "That we may obtain this faith the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and sacraments as instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith where and when it pleases God, namely, that God, not for our own merits but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake."

A year before this baptism there had not been a Lutheran church in Needles but in 1944 a young seminary graduate had started a congregation in a converted storehouse, very likely because of the influx of men into the area to trained in desert warfare.

I am sure my mother was happy to find a pastor of her new faith there in a backwater town of the Mojave desert, but the result would not have been any different if she had been there alone and had followed the directions she had recently learned from a Lutheran catechism: "In case of emergency when no pastor is available, pour water over the child and say, 'I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.'" The promise and the power would have been the same. "That we may obtain this faith the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted."

Most of you, I suspect, came into contact with ministry in a way that was essentially the same, though the circumstances may have been different. We continued to experience ministry through the years from parents, grandparents, Christian teachers, pastors, and professors, and from Christian friends. Though born in sin and as enemies of God, many perhaps even most of us cannot remember a time we did not have "this faith." We are like the first-year Sunday school

student who expressed her amazement at all the stories she was learning, “I did not know Jesus did all those things. I only knew he loved me.” No matter how much more we have learned and experienced about ministry since our baptism, the essence of ministry has remained the same and is quite simple: “That we may obtain this faith the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted.” I hope that when this storytime has ended, we will end where we began: experiencing and practicing and cherishing this ministry.

There is, of course, one important footnote to this part of the story. Both Luther and Walther correctly observe that we were first ordained to the ministry of the Word in our baptism. No one can give you more power for ministry than that which was given to you and to every Christian in baptism. When Christ through the church calls you to publically exercise this ministry on behalf of brothers and sisters in the faith, you did not receive something essentially different than what you received in baptism.

Storytime

A popular trend today is binge-watching a TV series. Instead of picking up the episodes of a series one per week over a long period of time, with a certain amount of real life between the episodes, the viewer downloads a whole bunch of episodes and crams them all together, one episode after another. The pattern of binge-watching is the pattern I have followed as the outline of this paper.

The point of storytime today is discovering what lessons we can learn about practicing this ministry from looking at the reactions others have to the ministry. What moves them? What draws them? What annoys them? What gains their respect, even if they reject the values you preach?

The Stories

The first of the human stories that each of us needs to remember about ministry is the story about the people whom God used to bring us to the public ministry. Their stories reflect not only on their love for God and for you, but also God’s grace to you through them.

My grandparents as a young married couple escaped their life as peasant farmers in Russia not long before of the Communist revolution. All of the Brug family who remained behind vanished into the gulag. The young couple carried with them to America a recommendation in Russian and English from the Lutheran pastor, who could reach their village only once a month: “pious Lutherans.” They came from a situation in which the faith was kept alive largely in the home with relatively little pastoral presence. One memory of my grandfather is that every morning before he left for the fields and every evening when he returned from the fields, he sat and read from the Bible out loud in German. He rarely missed the weekly prayer meetings with “the brothers.”

My mother was able to see only the first ten years of my life, but one of the things she left was a love for books, reflected in many trips to the Sage Library in Bay City. When she died, the librarian ignored the rule that children could not check out books from the adult library and gave me an adult card. The librarian was however still a stickler for the library rules, and one summer day when I got some books, read them, and came back in the evening to get some more, she informed me that it was not permissible to check out books for less than one day. After my

mother's death, I had lots of time for reading so one of the things I did when I was staying at my aunt's, where there were no kids to play with, was to read my way through their encyclopedia (not every word, of course, just the interesting articles).

I was the first person in our immediate family line to have more than a high school education and only the second to have a high school education (my mother was the first). My father, who had only a grade school education, had one son and four grandsons—all of them became WELS pastors.

The Lord has his ways to lead his ministers to their calling. Near the end of his life my father told me how the idea of being a pastor was first planted in me. My 1st and 2nd grade teacher, a recent New Ulm graduate, told my parents that it was time for them to start thinking about their son being a pastor.

My pastor for most of those years was John F. Brenner. He had remarkable success in getting young men to become pastors, but one thing I especially remember was when I was going to preach my first sermon at my home congregation. He said, "Your grandfather has attended German church his whole life and you are going to preach your first sermon in German." I do not recall any negotiations on the issue.

I can't begin to mention all the ways our worker training system contributed to moving me toward being a pastor so I will leave it at one sentence—studying Romans for the first time in a high school religion class at MLS. (I went to MLS because I wanted to play football, and I entered the pastor track because I did not want to play the piano, which teachers had to do)

In the 1960's there was a lot of negativism in society toward every sort of authority. And there was a lot of negativism toward the Wisconsin Synod because of the break with the Missouri Synod and a lot of pessimism about the future of little WELS, which would dry up and blow away without big brother. It was claimed WELS was legalistic. A great factor in overcoming reputation this was the positive evangelical spirit projected to the students by the seminary professors, such as Carl Lawrenz and Armin Schuetze.

I served some wonderful new mission congregations in Pennsylvania, and I think two little items give a hint of what I learned from them. Of 135 communicants that were gathered to form my first congregation, only two were life-long WELS members. The great majority had to leave behind churches where their families had been members for generations to start a place where the gospel could thrive for the next generation. Their sad experiences made it clear that a proper exercise of church fellowship is necessary to protect people from the damaging effects of false teaching on people's souls. This must be joined with a love of sharing the gospel with the victims on society and the false church. Typical of their spirit was the direction I received from the women's group that I should not attend their meetings because there were not enough evenings in the week and I needed to be out doing evangelism, not going to their meetings.

All of you know, but it still needs to be mentioned, that in most cases the most influential person on our ministries is our wife. Football coaching was pivotal to my life, since after my first year at the seminary, I was sent to New Ulm specifically to coach the high school team for a year at Martin Luther Academy. On the first day outside the gym I met the college's new womens basketball and volleyball coach. She had a better year than I did—since her teams were

undefeated in both sports (or maybe one loss) and I don't think we won a game. She later told me she knew she was going to marry me the first time she saw me, but it took her a couple of months to let me in on the game plan. It took a little doing on God's part of get a South Dakota girl and Michigan boy together to carry out his plans for them. The statistic that maybe says the most to me about Irene is that 15 or 16 times—I have lost count—she has been asked to be a baptismal sponsor for a new child of God, many of them not our relatives. That says a lot about the kind of spiritual friend she has been to many people in many places.

Pastors' wives are in many cases the biggest multiplier of a ministry by the many ways they gave support above and beyond the call of duty, but perhaps more important by the way in which lives are their sermon and the text is "it is more blessed to give than to receive."

Last but not least I can mention the seminary (or rather the eight seminaries at which I have taught) and the men I learned a lot from— about 38 faculty colleagues, as well as over 1000 pastors who graduated in the 32 graduations since I was called to the seminary. When I looked at all their pictures lining the seminary's halls last spring, there were a lot of happy memories in reading the names of more than a thousand graduates but also a sobering truth—making it to a 40th anniversary in the ministry and beyond cannot be taken for granted. If you are going to make it, it will take all the gifts of God's grace to keep you on track. We Lutherans for good reason, don't like to call anything other than the Word and sacraments "means of grace," and certainly nothing can compare to them as the power to keep you on track, but the second most important means are what I will call the gifts of grace or the channels of grace, the people God places around you and the opportunities he gives you to grow in grace. Remember them in your prayers and give thanks for them.

Near the end of his ministry the famous evangelist Billy Graham was asked if he had any regrets and he said, "Yes, one. That I did not study enough." Now, it is possible to study too much if it takes you away from people, but if you keep the two in balance, the power of the Word and the power of people to help you, you will be blessed and will be a blessing to many. By our personalities and background most of us are inclined toward one end of the spectrum or the other. Too much study—not enough contact with people. Not enough study—too much time with people. Finding the right balance of these is one of the key tests of every ministry.

Reading People

Maybe besides Billy Graham's list of regrets we could add two more: "That I did not pray enough" and that "I did not read people enough."

Nothing stands on the same level as reading the Word every day as a source of direction for your ministry, but probably highest in the list below reading the Word is reading the people that God brings into touch with your ministry. The lessons we learn from reading them will help us carry out our ministry in a way which will not only be right in the eyes of God but right in the eyes of people.

We get a little uncomfortable, and rightly so, with any expression which might imply that we can enhance the Word. But we are assured by Scripture that by their life and their demeanor Christians can "make the teaching about God our Savior attractive" (Ti 2:10). The Greek word is *kosmosin*. Cosmetics do not make a woman more beautiful than she already is, but they may

attract the attention of superficial men. In the same way godly behavior and a life that reflects God-given peace cannot convert someone or add power to the Word, but they can and often do lead observers to think, “I want some of what he has. How can I get it?” If people see in the public ministers of the Word qualities of care and compassion and sincerity, this will “make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.” We can learn a lot about what the world is looking for in a ministry by listening to their words, both the kind ones and the unkind.

Here are a few of the lessons I learned from the people whom God brought me into contact with in my ministry and whose words and actions have stuck with me.

The Media

Since we live in a media age, I will start with the editors of the local newspaper in West Newton, PA. In the small town where our congregation was started because of the arrival of a radically liberal pastor at the LCA church, my ordination and installation were front page news. When I went in to pay for our weekly ad, I thanked the editor for the story. She was a staunch supporter of the LCA pastor and if ladies can be curmudgeons, she fit the bill. Her response was, “Humph, that’s really strange. People just come in to complain. They don’t come in to say thank you.” A thank you can go a long way. After that, she readily gave me access to the pages of the paper. When I would go to pastors conference, I would submit a story to the paper. I would always put in a statement like “the Wisconsin Synod, the mostly biblically oriented Lutheran synod.” The article would always appear in the paper but with an editorial change: “the Wisconsin Synod, according to Pastor Brug, the mostly biblically oriented Lutheran synod.” Every week she published a short sermon in the paper. Arrangements were made through the local ministerial association. One week when I came in, she called me aside and said, “You do not belong the local ministerial association and I do not agree with your reasons for not belonging, but the community deserves to hear your voice, so I am going to give you two weeks every year to put a sermon in the paper without going through the ministerial association.” (Naturally, they were always objective justification sermons.)

When we arrive in Pennsylvania, there was no available rental housing in the small town, so our furniture was stored in a garage and we lived with a member for some weeks. (It was a nice house with a pool so it was not that much of a hardship). We eventually found a house we could rent that needed a lot of work from our members. After we had been there less than a year, due to some broken promises by the owner, we and our brand new baby were going to be out on the street in a matter of days. During this time I happened to go in to the newspaper office and the owner’s daughter who was at the desk that day commented, “People around town are talking about you and your wife and the bad deal you are getting and how well you deal with it. I don’t think I could do what you two are doing, but, of course, we all expect more from you.” Fair or not, that is the way the world views the ministry: “we expect more from you.” I guess that is just a worldly version of the principle “to whom much is given, from him much is expected.” “We expect more from you” is one of the most important lessons for every pastor to remember.

We live in a time when the media are becoming more hostile toward biblical Christianity, but it is worth working for a good relationship with those who want to give everyone a fair hearing.

Bad Media

I am not going to deal with hostile publicity against the church in public media, but only that hostility which is common in private media—that is rumors and false reports about the church from opponents inside or outside the church, which may be due either to ignorance or to malice.

It is not uncommon for opponents of Christianity in general or WELS in particular to put out disinformation to discourage people from seeking the church. In the small town where we lived people were being told that if they became WELS they would not be allowed to have non-WELS people in their homes, the women could not wear make-up, they could not play cards, etc. A Lutheran who was interested in our church but scared by the rumors told this to our Catholic neighbor, who responded, “Well, yesterday I was at the pastor’s house and his wife thumped us at cards, so I think you should check out that church if you want to.” I do not know whether or not she noticed if my wife was wearing lipstick.

On a number of occasions when I was conducting exploratory or outreach meetings of some sort whether in the US or in Europe, those who were afraid of our ministry sent ringers to the meetings either to raise a lot of questions about the role of women, closed communion, etc. or to take names of their people who were attending our meetings.

In Finland we were offering a series of free conference meetings. We were not attacking any beliefs but were making positive presentations on doctrines like inspiration and inerrancy, etc. We were meeting at a school of an evangelical group within the state church. The man who had invited us had been told, “Don’t invite Professor Brug anymore and don’t meet with WELS anymore.” The president of the school, who was not our friend, was at the meeting. When one of the participants spoke against women priests, the president said, “You people need to be more tolerant.” One of the participants jumped up and said, “I was really heartened to hear our president’s words about tolerance. I assume this means that the board’s decision to try to suppress our meetings is going to be rescinded, or are we the only ones who do not get tolerance?” There was no need for the president to answer the question. The answer was obvious and became certain when the man who had invited us lost his position and was pursued even when he sought secular employment.

The Appeal of the Gospel

There is a time when we must confront error and errorists as Jesus and Paul did, but overall the best way to fight negatives is with positives. Speaking to Muslims you could say all kinds of bad things about Muhammed and they would all be true. Speaking to Catholics you could say all kinds of bad things about the pope and the Catholic church and they would be true, but the best response to Antichrist is Christ. If people experience the joy of full and free justification, everything else will fall away.

We can never forget how rare the gospel is in the world and how many people have never heard it. If you present the pure gospel of objective justification, whether to Muslims in Milwaukee or Russians in Omsk, it is common to hear a reaction like “I never heard anything like that before. I need to hear more.”

Some troubled souls are robbed of the joy that we have found in the gospel by legalistic teaching in their church. My most memorable confirmand was a man named Mike. He was well

indoctrinated in traditional Catholicism. As we progressed through BIC class, he told me his grandmother had been warning him that if he did not stop going to my class he would go straight to hell. As providence would have it, the next lesson was going to be on the Antichrist. As a young pastor I struggled with how to break the news to Mike. So I decided not to tell him. All we did was read passages. “There is one God and one mediator between God and man.” I would add, “But some people will tell you there is another mediator.” “By grace are you saved through faith and not by works.” “But some people will tell you it is by faith and works.” “Some will come teaching doctrines of the devil forbidding people to marry and commanding then to abstain from meats.” And so we continued to read through the list, until Mike began to yell in an angry voice, “Stop reading. Stop reading, Pastor Brug. I don’t want to hear any more of this. I have something to say.” “What is it, Mike?” “The pope should go straight to hell.” Even a young inexperienced pastor found it easy to wrap up the lesson, “Mike, about 500 years ago there was a man named Martin Luther who reached a somewhat similar conclusion to yours when he said...”

Sometimes we just need to get out of the way and let the Word do its work. When we are tempted to rely too much on our arguing skills, our job is to let the lion out of the cage, and the lion will do a pretty good job of taking care of himself.

One of the last things I did before leaving to take a call to New Ulm was to baptize Mike’s first daughter. More than a decade later I came back to preach at the mortgage burning for the church. At the reception Mike came rushing up. “Pastor, do you remember me.” “How could I forget,” I thought. He dragged me away to a nearby table where two teenage girls sat. He said to them, “I always hoped you could meet the man God sent so that we could have peace.” If that happens once in a ministry it would be enough, but it happens so much more. You will bring peace to some who “never heard anything like that before.” You will bring peace to some whose faith God kept alive in a sea of false teaching until you could rescue them. You will also bring peace to people who were immersed in the gospel their whole life.

Our congregation always worked hard to get new kids that moved into the neighborhood into VBS and then Sunday school. One year we had two such boys. Their mother would bring them to Sunday school and occasionally stay for church. The father never came. I kind of assumed he was one of the legion of spiritually disinterested dads. When I went to his house to speak to him and told him who I was, he responded, “I am going to ask you one question. If you answer it right, I will let you in. Answer it wrong and I close the door.” Not having too many options, I waited for the question. “Are you here to talk to me about Jesus and forgiveness?” I liked the question. After I briefly confessed the gospel, he said, “Right answer. You are in.” He had been turned off by the dominance of the social gospel in his liberal church and had become disillusioned with the church, but the Lord had kept his faith alive.

In Finland I always made a point to seek out the groups that were struggling to keep faith alive in spite of a church that had largely abandoned the gospel. I was speaking to people from a pietistic group when one of them asked me a question that surprised me. “Do you teach objective justification?” (I liked the question.) After I quickly ran through the doctrine and affirmed that we taught it, he responded, “I am glad to hear that. Our old teacher always used to tell us, ‘In the liturgy we sing, ‘Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world,’ but in our heart we always say, ‘You took away the sin of the world.’” Not bad for pietists. Don’t assume too much from the label people bear.

Incidentally, at the same conference, as a member of a panel on pietism in Lutheranism, I explained some of the strengths and weakness of pietism as it had developed in Germany. I told them about the book *Timotheus Verinus*, which had recently been published by NPH. One of the panel members responded, “Here I am. Considered to be the expert on pietism in this part of the world, I have never heard of this book. How do I get it?” Don’t sell WELS short when it comes to estimating its ability to contribute to the welfare of the church even outside our circles. (I admit when I saw the translation of *Timotheus Verinus* published by NPH I wondered, “Why in the world are they publishing that?” I soon found out.)

Just as we need to be aggressive in seeking to reach those who have never heard the gospel, we need to be aggressive in seeking to strengthen those in the church whose faith is hanging on by a thread because of false teaching. While we hate the crime, we have compassion and understanding for the victims. Also we need to have an understanding for those who have some rough edges and maybe even some suspicion and bitterness left over from what they have experienced in the church. In my early ministry I sometimes heard WELS pastors say that they would rather have raw, unchurched prospects than refugees from the battles in Missouri. Like soldiers returning from war some (but not all) refugees from the spiritual battles in other churches may have been wounded or damaged by the battle. It is great when a doctor assists a baby through birth, but it is just as great when he stabilizes the life of someone who has been wounded. Events of our time have made us more understanding of the post-traumatic stress that results from physical wars. We need to have the same understanding for the post-traumatic stress caused by spiritual warfare.

We need to be concerned about the few as well as the many. The smallest congregation I ever preached to was a congregation of three old ladies in a city in the mountains of Pennsylvania. On that Sunday evening only these three ladies, in a town of eleven Lutheran churches, had enough concern to start a confessional church to come to our service in a snow storm. In many towns of Scandinavia the confessional Lutherans (at least those ready to take a stand) can be counted on one hand. In parts of our country this problem of small scattered flocks will become a growing challenge for us. The situation my grandfather faced a century ago in Russia will likely become more common among us: small, scattered groups that may be able to have a pastor only once a month. While we look to the great cities and we work for large congregations, we cannot forget the small scattered flocks.

The principle “remember how much more you have had than so many others, and be patient with those who are struggling to find the truth” applies also to how we share disputed doctrines, for example, church fellowship. I heard about a group of young pastors in the state church of Denmark who were struggling with how to respond to the liberalism of their church. I wrote to them and asked them if they would like me to come and visit them in Copenhagen, and they said yes. After I explained to them the biblical principles of church fellowship, they all laughed (a friendly laugh) and said, “Certainly you understand that to us you are like a man from Mars, a strange visitor from a world we know nothing of, but it sounds like what you said is biblical and we must check it out.” They asked whether our principles required that they immediately leave the state church and leave their flocks behind. I said, “No, your first duty is to warn the sheep against the wolves and to try to lead them away, but there comes a point at which, if the sheep want to stay with the wolves, you must leave with those who are willing to go with you. You must decide when your testimony has been heard and rejected, when you have fulfilled your duty

to warn, and now it is time to fulfill your duty to leave. When you are climbing over a fence there is a brief time when you have one leg on each side of the fence, but this is not a comfortable long-term position.”

We sometimes feel distress when we think that the application of the principles of church fellowship, such as closed communion, causes people pain. The best cure for this ailment (besides the simple command of God) is to learn by experience how much more serious pain is caused by false doctrine. The first type of pain is like the pain that results from surgery, pain that is necessary before healing can take place. The second is like the pain of cancer that can lead to death.

Even new Christians in their heart recognize the biblical principles of church fellowship, because they are just common sense. My members in Pennsylvania told me that when they understood what their new liberal pastor stood for, they did not feel right receiving communion from him. They said, “Then we only felt it; we did not understand why. Now we do.” When I was teaching Sunday school in a boys prison in Russia (a place one step removed from hell), after class I was talking to the boys and they had a question for me. These boys had had only a few month of once-a-week instruction. The previous week had been Easter and they had their annual opportunity to kiss the Orthodox bishop’s ring and receive his blessing. Their question was that they had not felt right receive the blessing of such a man and they wondered if this was the right feeling.” Most principles of Scripture are not that complicated. They appeal to the heart and the head.

Without a doubt one of the biggest obstacles many people perceive in outreach in today’s world is the biblical roles of men and women. The starting point, of course, is to remember that all the principles God gives us are for people’s good. They are helps not hindrances; they are not problems but solutions. The world swings from one extreme to the other and jumps from the frying pan into the fire. Selfish patriarchal abuses in the family are like living under the czar. Trading that bad situation for the type of radical feminist ideology which destroys the family is like living under Lenin and Stalin. (Notice there is no comma after *ideology*. We are not talking about every feminist principle but about those that destroy the family. The point is not to compare the relative evils of the czar and Lenin, but that trading one extreme for another is not a gain.) The only model that can produce the greatest happiness possible in a sinful world is the balanced biblical model of following the example of Christ as a head who has a head. The biblical model properly understood is appealing to both men and women. This was brought home to me at one of our church picnics at the township park in Pennsylvania. Nearby, in another pavilion was what seemed to be another church picnic. As I was sitting there, a woman came up to me and asked, “Is this a church picnic?” I said that it was and I was the pastor. She said, “I can’t help but notice the difference between your picnic and ours. At your picnic there are so many men and fathers. At ours there are not. What are you doing that we are not?” She saw something she coveted. The single mother who has been deserted by her children’s father and left to fend for herself understands that this is not the way things should be. The biblical principles of the family are in themselves attractive (even groups like the Mormons and Nation of Islam capitalize on the importance of families and fathers). In a world which works so hard to undermine these principles, Christian men and women have a special duty to “make the teaching of God attractive” by the way they live those roles and by the way they model giving and receiving forgiveness where they fall short.

The Other Side of the Coin

The gospel which results in the greatest outpouring of love and gratitude also results in the greatest outpouring of hate and resentment. We sometimes make the mistake of thinking that the world hates God especially for his law. There is a grain of truth in that, but they hate him more for the gospel. The world can convince itself that they are justified to hate a god that imposes a law that restricts their freedom and a god who threatens them with punishment, but even perverted twisted reason can't convince itself that it is right to reject a God that loves them and forgives them as a free gift. The world resents the law which restricts its freedom, but it resents even more the gospel which makes it clear that they can never please God on their own. The world is quite comfortable with a watered-down "gospel" that talks about a nice grandfather god who is not that upset about sin and is ready to give them a free pass or grade on a curve, but they cannot stand a God who tells them that there is only one road to fellowship with God, the way of Jesus' death and atonement for sin, and that every other way must be rejected. The gospel, even more than the law, is a threat to everything the world holds dear.

When I was invited to the mosque in Milwaukee to discuss Jesus, there could be a certain amount of hospitality of shared feasts and shared moral values, but there could be no hospitality for a Son of God who paid for sin. I encountered a small element of physical confrontation there only once, when an angry Azeri grabbed me and started to shake me up and yell that I was a Jimmy Swaggert who had come there to destroy them. I realized he was half right. When my hosts rushed to my rescue in the midst of the multilingual shouting match, they apologized profusely but said "We are sorry, but surely you understand what a dangerous man you are." The words jarred me, but I quickly realized they were completely right. There was only one thing that was a threat to their way of life: not exposure of Muhammed, not shared moral values, not the Jesus who is a nice prophet, but only the Jesus who is the Son of God, the world's only Savior. I am confident that when Paul was accused of being the man who caused trouble all over the world, he realized he was as guilty as could be. The only threat to entrenched paganism was not another nice moral teacher, but the Jesus who was the Son of God, the world's only Savior.

Later, when the Ramadan fast was coming to an end, I was talking to a group of men trying to keep the focus on Jesus. As they were trying to change the subject, one of the men broke in and said, "Just a minute. I think what the brother is trying to tell us is that the important question is what about Jesus. Is that right?" When I said, "That's right, Wally," the young men began chanting "Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar." They said it was for the end of the fast, but I think it was because Wally was getting on dangerous ground. I had the feeling my career at the mosque was coming to an end. Sure enough, as I left that evening, the leader of the mosque drew me over to a corner and said, "When we want to see you here again, you will get an invitation." I have been checking my mailbox, but no invitations. Jesus, the Son of God, the world's only Savior is dangerous to everything the world stands for, and if you talk about him, you are dangerous too. You can't excuse the world's hatred for you since it is really hatred for Christ, but you can try to understand where it is coming from. If you are bringing Christ's word, the people of the world must fear you because you bringing the only power that can defeat them.

One other thing I learned from dealing with Muslims is that the person whom the world hates the most is the person who asserts the claims of Christ, but the person it despises the most is the wishy-washy Christian that does not have strong convictions and will not defend them.

The Biggest Disappointment

Our biggest sorrow is for those who reject the gospel and even more so, those who had the gospel and throw it away. The biggest disappointment, however, is often for those who, to use the King James term, are “almost persuaded,” those who feel the truth of Scripture’s claims but have too much love or too much fear of the world to follow through to the necessary conclusion.

Back to the young Danes for a minute. We were speaking of another friend of theirs who was not present. When I asked about his views, they laughed and said, “You would describe him as a person who is carefully looking for the most comfortable place on the fence.” Both at home and overseas I have met many such people, as I am sure you have, people like the Finnish pastor who told me, “I find the principles of fellowship as you have explained them to be scriptural, but I have not found it practical to follow them.”

Then there are those who say all the right things and make promises that they never fulfill. Once a group came from Germany to have talks about preserving our fellowship with them, and they reached agreement with us, so we had a joint service, but like Zwingli after Marburg, they went home and did not abide by what they had agreed to. When you take people at their word, they may renege and leave you in an embarrassing position. If you find yourself in such a spot due to your most sincere efforts to do everything you could for unity, remember the advice which Armin Schuetze shared with me when we were discussing my work in Europe: “When you are trying to pull people out of the ditch, you are going to get mud splashed on you.” It’s an occupational hazard.

The Cultural Gap

One of the big emphases in mission training, and rightly so, is the importance of understanding other cultures. But one of the main misconceptions here is that this principle applies especially when we are dealing with more remote cultures like Asian or Hispanic. Actually this cultural factor is pretty much the same no matter who we are dealing with in our mission work. This in fact has been the theme of this presentation. We must read every prospect for cultural differences.

The biggest gap is, of course, between the culture of Christ and the culture of the world.

In some ways, the danger of cultural faux pas is greater when you are working with a culture quite close to your own. If I am in Hong Kong or Russia or in a mosque, I am very aware that I am walking through a cultural mine field and am on high alert. In a closer culture like Western European cultures or other Anglo-American cultures I may be much less aware of the hidden land mines. Once in Sweden Mrs. Helen Becker was asked to go through the refreshment line first and cut the first piece of cake. She cut an average to small size piece of cake by American standards and was later embarrassed to realize hers was twice as big as everyone else’s. (Secondary lesson: do not ask anyone from another culture to do anything in your culture that has not been modeled for them.)

Though there is a great deal of homogenizing of culture going on in the world, there are still significant cultural gaps, whether Chinese v American, white collar v blue collar, urban v agricultural, civilian v military, male v female, rich v poor, Democrats v Republicans, devout

Christian v cultural Christian, Texas v Wisconsin, Packer fans v normal football fans. A missionary need to give attention to all of these differences.

In some sub-cultures, lack of a coat and tie will mark you as unprofessional (though this is fading). In other settings a coat and tie might identify as Mr. Policeman, or maybe as Mormon, or maybe as Nation of Islam, depending in part on the color of your skin. Culture is complicated.

Most people (the French being a possible exception) will give you credit for trying and will be fairly tolerant of your cultural errors. When I was still a college student, we had an Apache student on campus who told us that Apaches don't expect the missionaries to be Apaches but to care about and respect Apaches. What people expect is not that missionaries share all their culture, but that they love them and respect them.

We must beware also imposing expectations for a pastor that might work in our culture but not elsewhere. Must we expect married Russian pastors and their families to be willing to serve anywhere in Russia? Must a pastor's wife be a Christian? We recognize the immigrant pastor who is training to serve only in a specific subculture, but what about an American pastor who wants to train to serve in only one area of the US?

Respecting a culture does not mean accepting all of it, but the right to criticize is earned by interaction. It is not automatically given. When I had warned an Anglo blue-collar prospect against some aspect of his life style, he told me, "I can put up with a lot in a pastor if he has convictions and seems to have his feet on solid ground."

People often notice little cultural things and read more meaning into them than we would have imagined. I was walking back from class through the forest on a cold Siberian winter day, when my translator, who was walking with me, commented, "Professor, you do not seem like an American; you are like a Russian." I was puzzled, but I think it was as simple as the fact that I was the only American who did not have a car but walked everywhere, and we shopped only for whatever we could carry home. A couple of days after I had arrived, when the mission's driver saw me, he asked how I had gotten home the day before and expressed his surprise that a recently arrived American could walk through the forest and actually arrive at his destination without getting lost. (I did not admit to him that luck and divine providence played a role.)

We should be careful about jumping conclusions about people in other cultures or judging by appearances. Once my wife and I were trying to reach a temple in a remote area of Hong Kong, where we were beyond the reach of the buses and vans, and there were no roads, only paths. Urban Hong Kongers mostly dress Western (t-shirts, jeans, etc., Western business attire) but the old man we met on the path was dressed in "pajamas" and rubber sole flip-flops. I approached him to be sure we were on the right path. While pointing first to the Chinese name of the temple that I had brought along with me written on a slip of paper and a picture of the temple and then to the path we were on and repeating this four or five times I said in very slow loud English (It always helps to talk louder when you are talking to someone who does not understand the language.) "Are we on the right way to this temple?" He replied in good British English, "Actually I am on my way to retrieve my automobile and would be honored to drive you to your destination." I think we were less than half a mile away by foot and it took a mile and a half to get there by road from where his car was parked, but both he and we were honored to ride in his vintage automobile. On another occasion in a similar village, a fisherman told us what was

important for us to know about his village to understand it, “We are the gateway to China. That is why the British were here, but they are not here anymore.”

The Root of All Kinds of Evil

If American missionaries get \$3000 dollars a month, Russian pastors get \$300, and Russian pensioners get \$30 a month, trouble is inevitable. In this case “money is the roots of all kinds of evils,” the foremost of which is jealousy. In America we pastors often feel like we belong to a lower economic class in contrast to the great wealth some people have. Many other Americans might see us as rather privileged. In Russia, common people and even professionals like dentists looked at me as rich and cultivated my friendship for the advantages a rich American could bring them. I grew to understand the suspicions the very wealthy might have about people’s motivation for being friendly to them. (The “new Russians” on the other hand looked at our missionaries as lower class. A nice new apartment was going up in Academgorodok, and one of the missionaries asked a new Russian how much the apartments would cost. The scornful reply was “Don’t bother to ask. YOU can’t afford it.”)

In the first case above, there are also the unintended side effects. If you were a thirty-dollars-a-month Russian pensioner, who would you rather have as your pastor—the 3000-dollar-a-month missionary paid for by Americans or the 300-dollar-a-month Russian pastor that you had to pay yourself.

In Africa I was often called Bwana, Boss, or Big Man (pronounced bigmon) by young men who wanted my cell phone number and asked if I had a Beemer or a Lexus in America. They refused to believe I did not have a cell phone until I showed them my pockets said I was one of the last two white people in the world that did not have a cell phone and was trying to become the last. They laughed and moved on to look for a better prospect.

Prejudices Still Are Powerful

We should never underestimate the entrenched power of racism and all sorts of prejudice (whether racial, ethnic, economic, or caste). We too often think of this too much in terms of white and black, but all that is needed for racism to be a problem is two races in the same area or people of the same race who have two shades of skin. Racism is often more intense between two closely related African tribes than between American missionaries and black Africans. We can make the mistake of assuming that people of one race or language can worship together from the earliest stages of their faith. The reasons for specialized, niche congregations go beyond linguistic differences. One example is the Russian/Ukrainian divide that existed long before the recent power grab by Putin. (This paragraph was written in 2015) The same kinds of issues can exist between Asian immigrant congregations or various groups of Eastern Othodox.

Even About Adiaphora

We have already mentioned the fact that people may draw sweeping conclusions from things we do or say, conclusions that are not necessarily accurate, but as far as how people respond to our ministry “perception is reality.” Early in my ministry a visitor commented how much he enjoyed WELS services, and the main reason was that WELS preaching is sincere. When I inquired why he felt this way, he told me that he knew my preaching was sincere because I did not read my sermons like pastors at other churches did. While I hoped his conclusion about our

sincerity was correct, but I was uncomfortable about the way he had arrived at it. It is inescapable that for some people their perception of our ministry will be shaped by small things, perhaps even things that are more stereotype than truth.

Professor Anson Rainey of Tel Aviv University in Israel had a lot of experience working with WELS people. What stereotypes might a former Texas Baptist, now a liberal Israeli archaeologist form about Wisconsin Lutherans? Once when he was staying at our house on one of his recruitment trips, he explained his strategy to me. “When I am looking for good dependable hard workers, I go to Wisconsin Lutherans. When I am looking for money, I go to Texas Baptists.” (Do most stereotypes have some truth to them?). When WLS went to Israel for a Tel Aviv University excavation for the first time, some of the Israelis were concerned about what it would be like working with these Wisconsin Lutherans. Thinking that perhaps we were “fundamentalists” like the BYU Mormons who were already there, they asked Rainey whether Lutherans were like Mormons. He replied, “Not really.” They asked, “Well, what is the difference?” He answered, “Lutherans drink more and curse less.” “O would some power the giftie gie us to see ourselves as others see us.” –Robert Burns

Another time that perceptions and misperceptions of WELS were on display was at the first free conference held at MLC in New Ulm with participants from WELS, ELS, LCMS and many refugees or soon-to-be refugees from the ELCA. For many of the ELCA-ers it was the most extensive contact they had had with WELS people perhaps in their lives. It was interesting to hear their observations about this. On the last day, several were gushing about how wonderful (and unexpected) it was that it was the Wisconsin Synod that provided this opportunity for free and frank theological discussions. (This of course was not true, but it was the perception due to the event being held at MLC and to the hospitality they had received.) One commented on that he had not imagined WELS would have such a fine college. One commented how much better the cafeteria food was than at his school. On the last day, a prominent ELCA historian commented that he had not had so much contact with Wisconsin Lutherans since his boyhood as a Norwegian Lutheran among German Lutherans in the Ripon Wisconsin area. He said Wisconsin German Lutherans were fine neighbors, and they always made it clear that it was a fine and wonderful thing to be a Norwegian Lutheran and that in all the world there was only one thing better than being a Norwegian Lutheran. Perhaps he said it with an edge, but he said it with a smile. The same speaker also “thanked” the Missouri Synod for dumping their bag of Seminex garbage on the ELCA’s porch. One could almost hear the LCMS teeth gnashing as praise was heaped on WELS for being paragons of ecumenical contact, an irony that was compounded by the fact that Missouri’s Luther Academy was paying for a lot of the bills.

My own personal angst going into conference was that my paper on scriptural inerrancy was going to be the last on the program and I would have to hit the ELCA pretty hard, and this could end the conference on a sour note. My concern was that the scheduled reactor to my paper was a dogmatics professor from an ELCA seminary in the Twin Cities. The day before my paper was to be delivered, I met him in the hall, surrounded by a bunch of his students including collared women. He said he enjoyed my paper and warned me that his only major criticism was going to be that I was far too nice to the ELCA. They were in fact much worse than I had stated in my paper. An interesting dynamic of the conference was that “moderate” ELCA were much harder on liberal ELCA also in ad hominem terms than we were. As is typical at such conferences the ELCA theologians were much more interested in attacking LCMS and LCMS in attacking ELCA

than either were in attacking us (a question of our relevance in their eyes?) As usual with such conferences, I do not know of much in the way of tangible results as far as establishing fellowship, but the truth was presented, people had many of their stereotypes of WELS challenged and to some degree corrected, and if they don't like our theology, at least they like our food.

Traits of a Minister

The Scriptures of course set qualifications in the Pastoral Epistles, but there are a few other traits that deserve comment.

A minister has to be hard-headed and hard-hearted like Jeremiah and Isaiah and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 2 and 3). He can't give up and has to be more stubborn and more determined than the opponents.

When I was a parish pastor, I always made it a priority to regularly visit unchurched family members of congregation members so that when their death came, I could say I had done everything I could for them. One who sticks in my mind was grumpy old man who fit all the stereotypes of a hard-scrabble coal miner. Religiously he was a bitter, burned out, unchurched Catholic. When I came up to his old house back in the holler, he was often out in the yard working. His typical greeting was, "Not you again!" followed by "I guess the only way to get rid of you is to go up on the porch and have a beer." I would say, "That's about it," and another round would begin. I would present the law and the gospel, and he would argue against it, at times vehemently, but always letting me have my say. Once as the argument was coming to a conclusion, he informed me that he would never join my church because it was full of hypocrites. I informed him that he was mistaken. My church was not full of hypocrites. We still had room for one more, and he would fit right in. He looked at me coldly and said, "You're a haaard man, Mcgee."¹ I believe it was a begrudging compliment. I asked his wife, as sweet a woman as you will find, why he kept arguing with me. She explained, "You really irritate him. It has never taken him more than one time to get rid of any of my preachers, and he can't get rid of you. As he sees it, if he quits the argument, you win. To win he has to make you quit." Eventually I took a call elsewhere. He eventually moved to Florida. If we happen to meet on the streets of heaven, we will probably both blurt out, "Not you again." The rock was hit with a hammer. Some seed was planted. Judgment Day will reveal the results.

The minister has to take a long-term view. Some of the seed he plants will be harvested by someone else. Some of the seed will lie in the ground a long time before he sees results. In western Pennsylvania where I was the only WELS pastor when I first arrived, I used to try to have contacts with pastors in other Lutheran churches who were having confessional struggles. One was the pastor of a large suburban congregation in Pittsburgh. He was a faithful pastor who was fighting against the lodge and other aberrations in the church. He was using a lot of WELS materials. He took my wife and I out to restaurants a couple of times and on one occasion I commended him for his determined efforts but told him he needed to inform his people about the state of the ALC and get his sheep away from the wolves. He responded, "John, if the real Lutherans in my congregation knew what the ALC was, they would all be over at your church the next week, and I would be left with the rest of them. I like you, John, but not that much." (He

¹ Cultural note: "Yor a haard man, Mcgree" was a catch phrase from a popular, long-running early radio show.

did give his blessing to his members who found out on their own and came our way.) I moved away and lost touch. Twenty-three years later I was sitting in my office in Mequon going through the mail and I noticed an envelope with his return address. The gist of the letter was “John I thought you would be happy to know that I have taken your advice and we are out of the ELCA. I could come to WELS, but I am not sure my people could come quite that far. We are independent and I have a reliable young co-pastor who will carry on the work of our congregation.” I am sure there were many factors that led to his action, most of all the Word, but the fact that after more than twenty years he remembered our talk and had the desire to inform me about the outcome made an impression on me to not lose hope while the seed lies in the ground.

The minister cannot devote much time to responding to criticism whether fair or unfair. It is true that at times he has to respond as Paul responded to the Judaizers in Galatians and 2 Corinthians, but he is somewhat embarrassed to have to do so, and does it for the sake of those who are in danger of being misled, not for his own honor.

One of our professors who experienced this was Professor Becker who had a lot of bad things written about him before and after he left the Missouri Synod. Some of them were true—he was in fact guilty of supporting biblical doctrine. Many of them were false—he was not legalistic or unloving. When asked about why he did not respond to such things, he had a simple answer. “It is not my job to clean up after every elephant in the parade.”

One morning in dogmatics class the students were laughing and informed me that bad things were written about me in *Christian News*. They asked how I would respond. I replied, “Probably not all.” But since I had not seen, it I asked, “What did it say?” They said, “They accused you of being a biblicist.” I decided I could live with it.

Focus on the Good

A lot of bad things and disappointments happened in my ministry, but I really don't remember a lot of them or think about them unless there is a specific need to. Focus on the joys not the frustrations. Focus on the people who have been a blessing to you and to whom you have been a blessing. Remember the special people God has brought into your ministry to bless you.

In my first mission congregation after about five years, we were in the new church building and had become self-supporting. We no longer had to look for ways to get around the mission board regulations (just kidding, just kidding). The first thing they did in the new budget was give me a 33% raise. I had not been at the financial meeting because they had told me I did not need to come to budget meetings, but to go do evangelism. When we were to adopt the budget, I said I really appreciated the intention, but our family was doing okay and the congregation had taken on a lot of debt, etc. etc. The financial chairman, who was also the president of the congregation, broke in and said, “Pastor, I am confused. I thought your job was preaching the gospel, and our job is worrying about the money. You do your job, and we will do ours.” The only response I could come up with was, “Okay.” It turned out they were right. Meeting the budget was no problem.

I received quite a number of calls while serving there but when the call came that I would take (to teach at New Ulm) I announced this by a letter to each family so that the emotions we all

knew would overflow would not detract from a service. But before I did that, I went to the dental office of the man in whose dental building my office and our midweek Bible classes had been located until we had our new church (the same man in whose house we had lived). He was just coming out the door as I arrived and when he saw me coming he broke into tears and said, “Don’t say anything.” He just gave me a hug and said “Now there are tears, but that is what heaven is for.”

Conclusion

Inspirational or instructional conferences can often be something of a downer. The water is already up to my neck, and I am supposed to do more? Why do his ideas work and mine don’t? Why do his ideas work there but not here? In the ministry as in the rest of life, it is true as Ecclesiastes says “time and chance happens to them all.” If no seed is planted there will be no harvest. But sometimes a lot of seed is planted, but the harvest is small. Big churches grow up in a small town. Tiny churches are the only result in a megalopolis. Churches built on false teaching prosper. Those founded on the truth suffer. Time and chance (or more accurately God’s providence) happens to them all.

We have a treasure but it is in jars of clay. All the jars can do is “store and pour.”

Clay storage jars are meant to store food, but they are meant to do more. They are meant to pour out food to the hungry. Jars of clay do not serve their chief purpose when they are in a warehouse or buried in the ground. If human jars of clay just store the gospel, if they just hide the gospel, they are not serving their main purpose. The jars that hid the Dead Sea Scrolls for 2000 years did a good thing for archaeology, but the precious scrolls were for all practical purposes lifeless during the 2000 years they lay hidden in a cave. Our Bibles are for all practical purposes lifeless when they lie on a coffee table or sit on a bookshelf. Their chief purpose is accomplished only when they are in pouring mode, not storing mode. Preserving the Word is good and necessary. Pouring out the Word is even better. The Bible is the power of God onto salvation. The Bible functions as the power of God onto salvation only when it is read, heard, and remembered. The jars of clay do not control, nor are they responsible for how often the Word converts a person who was dead in sin to life in Christ. But the jars of clay do have some control and some responsibility for how often the Word is poured out so it can be heard and remembered.

Clay storage vessels can’t make the food they contain any better than it already is, and blemishes in the jar to not take away the life-giving power of the food.

Moral and spiritual weaknesses of the messengers can turn people off and prevent them from hearing the Word. We won’t address that issue in this paper. The ability we jars of clay have to pour out the Word is also limited by physical weakness. Jars of clay are fragile. They break.

What is the biggest hindrance to your service to the Lord? I would say it is hands down your need for sleep. How much more could you do to serve the Word if you did not have to sleep a third of your life away?

And then there is health and age. Even as our inner self grows stronger, our outer self is wasting away. After forty years of preaching and teaching and serving in a congregation, a pastor might begin to feel that now he is beginning to have enough knowledge and experience to have a somewhat of a handle on this. How much different would your life as a teenager be if you could live it over again with the knowledge and experience you have now. How much different would your ministry be if you could start it again with forty years of study and experience? But you can't. Age will erode your ability, and death will sweep you away. And a new jar of clay will have to start from scratch where you started 40 or 50 years ago, eager and strong, but with so much to learn, much it perhaps to be learned the hard way.

But there is a comfort even if this. If God has passed on the gospel in jars of clay ever since the Fall, through the nearly total apostasy of the world that was, through the great Flood, through era after era of pride and apostasy, through Israel's unfaithfulness, through horrors of persecution, through the nearly total corruption of the Christian church, he is not going to stop now.

Even when jars of clay lied broken and buried in the ground, their work continues even after they themselves are dust, because the essence of their work was never them but the message they carried, and they have passed that message to others who will in turn pass it on to others, and so it will continue till Christ returns.

And jars of clay, though they lie broken in the ground, do not cease to be. The broken pieces of pottery lie in the ground waiting for the archaeologist to put them back together. And so it is also with us jars of clay. We lie in the ground for a while, waiting for the pieces to be put back together again into a vessel without blemish that will serve in honor and glory forever.

We have this treasure in jars of clay
to show that this all-surpassing power is
from God and not from us