

THE AWKWARD SHEPHERD: TACTICS FOR A YOUNG PASTOR TO IMPROVE HIS  
INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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## ABSTRACT

Whether a pastor serves as a minister of a congregational flock or as a teacher of students in an institution, face-to-face communication plays a large role in his call. Yet for some pastors who have just graduated from seminary, the most daunting parts of ministry can be the hand-shaking at the end of worship, the narthex small talk after the service, the personal welcoming of new visitors to the church, and the continual communication he has to have with the souls entrusted to him. Some pastors struggle with social anxiety, even if they would not admit it. This project examines the role interpersonal communication plays in ministry and how pastors can make use of it. For the pastor who struggles with feeling awkward and anxious in social settings, researched tactics for him to try are given to help him improve in these environments, as well as interpersonal advice from pastors in the field who have overcome social anxiety.

## INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 2021, I was attending a young adult retreat at Camp Phillip in Wautoma, Wisconsin. It was evening time, and a handful of us were sitting on the couches, sipping hot chocolate in the downstairs of the lodge. A conversation arose among the crowd about pastors, their personalities, and their gifts. The discussion was not about any specific pastors in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Instead, the group was speaking about the general nature of WELS pastors. Naturally, since I was a Middler at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary then, the conversation was directed at me and the group asked for my opinion. I tried to be evangelical in my approach, but I could tell that one person in the group had an agenda he was trying to push within the conversation, and eventually, when I was finished speaking, he voiced his frustration.

With a passionate tone the man said to me, “I have some respect for WELS pastors, I really do. I would even say that WELS produces the best preachers out of all the Lutheran synods I have visited. But that’s all they are: good preachers. So many of them are awkward when you converse with them. And some are incredibly snarky. A man can be a good preacher, but that does not mean he is a good pastor.”

I asked him to expand on that thought which led to his answer that WELS pastors, in general, are good at talking at people, but horrible at talking with people. Eventually the topic of conversation shifted, but my mind stayed there. I pondered on that thought the rest of the night, wondering if I might fall into his mold of knowing how to talk from the pulpit but not in the narthex.

After much reflection on that conversation, I came to the conclusion that this man was over-generalizing the personality of the WELS pastorate. He seemed to be speaking more out of emotion than fact. I do not think it is wise or fair to say that out of the hundreds of pastors currently serving in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, most of them do not know how to converse well with people. But I do believe he spoke from experience, and I have talked with other people throughout my ministerial education that have shared some concerns about the interpersonal skills of the shepherds within our church body.

I am not of the opinion that our brotherhood of pastors is in need of a full, 360 degree shift in how they are taught to communicate. But, it is fact to say that there are a diverse amount of personalities among WELS pastors, and where there are various personalities, there are various talents. Some men are gifted in the realm of interpersonal conversation. Their hands do not sweat when they have to shake hands with visitors at church. They thrive being in large groups, look forward to it, and love getting to know other people's stories and listen to them talk. They know when to make eye contact, how to have inviting posture, and how to use nonverbals to communicate. They do not feel anxious among people. In fact, their favorite part of being a pastor is being around people. Yet, for some men, these gifts do not come naturally. Social anxiety can cripple a young pastor's willingness to even make small talk in the narthex after service. Fear of rejection can push a young shepherd away from delving into deeper conversations with his flock. Some men would rather hide in their office after the service than hang out for the afterglow, go on a home visit, or even attend a get-together at member's house. Self-consciousness concerning one's awkwardness can curb a pastor from being relational, and sometimes dependable, to his own members.

Some pastors may even feel that they have made progress in this area of ministry until the COVID-19 pandemic started. Yet when face-to-face communication became rare for many churches in 2020 and after, it would not be surprising if those pastors who are not naturally gifted in interpersonal communication regressed in these skills since practice of it became less frequent. I have seen firsthand how it affected high schoolers. I have lived at Luther Preparatory School all three years of my on-campus Seminary education. Some students in my third year of living there are noticeably less capable interpersonally than the students of the past. Pandemic quarantine is a likely reason, and it has not just affected high school students, but adults as well.

Dr. Joanna Bauer writes about this evolution in societal communication:

With the increase of social media and computer technology, Americans are spending exponentially more time in front of a screen and less time interacting face to face with others. This has already led to decreased socialization at critical ages when communication skills are formed. As the pandemic rages on, it's exacerbated the situation by creating an highly isolated learning environment. With all of these factors at play, the COVID-19 generation of students may be fated to further lag behind in developing intercultural, interpersonal and nonverbal communication — skills that most acquire in school and are imperative interconnecting and forming relationships throughout our lifetimes.<sup>1</sup>

As student recruiter at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, I commonly hear potential Seminarians fearful of the language study. But it also is common for some to say that it is not the languages that scare them, but the working with people aspect of pastoral ministry. Thankfully, interpersonal skills can be learned by those who are not naturally gifted in them. Study and practice in this area can help ease the fear of a young pastor having to communicate with people

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1. Joanna Bauer, "The COVID-19 Generation's Lagging Interpersonal Skills Carry High Risks." *Fierce Education*, April 22, 2021.

often. And to those who are naturally gifted in this area, these skills can even be sharpened. Social anxiety can be overcome. Confidence in conversation can be practiced and even mastered.

In this paper, I will offer ways that a pastor can improve his interpersonal communication skills in the first five years of ministry. My goal is to state what interpersonal communication entails and display its importance within pastoral ministry. I will then identify specific symptoms that may lead a young pastor to struggle interpersonally. Then, I will provide tactics based on study, research, and practice that a pastor can try in order to gain confidence when interacting with people on an interpersonal level. Though I believe that a pastor of any age could learn from this research, the focus of this paper will be for young pastors with less than a decade of experience.

It is important to note that along with this research there will be much advice given in this paper. When the phrase “the pastor should” occurs, this is not criticism from a seminarian who has never been a pastor. Instead, it is encouragement for the young, socially anxious pastor to follow the research-based steps in order to help him overcome his uncomfortableness in interpersonal situations. These tactics may not work for every pastor in every situation, but they can be tested and tried. The only way for the pastor to know for sure if these would work for him in his specific ministry is to implement them.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The resources used in research for this project came from both spiritual and secular authors. The secular resources offered a wonderful look into the psychology of interpersonal communication, giving thorough explanations for how humans communicate, and they broke down aspects of human personality to the most scientific of definitions. Many of the spiritual resources not only included data and tests, they also had ministry applications in them which I found most helpful as this paper is intended for young pastors who find themselves struggling in the area of interpersonal connection. While the secular resources were dense with facts and scientific definitions, some of them lacked examples for real-world application. In this review I will comment on the five most helpful books for me that gave concrete examples of what both positive and negative interpersonal communication looks like. I will also list a couple other sources outside of literature that were helpful in this project.

### **Secular and Spiritual Books**

*An Essential Guide to Interpersonal Communication* by Quentin J. Schultze and Diane M.

Badzinski<sup>2</sup>

It is included in the title, and it makes its case, this book is essential. This was one of the most helpful resources I worked with. Filled with precious advice and concrete examples, this is a

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2. Quentin J. Schultze and Diane M. Badzinski. *An Essential Guide to Interpersonal Communication: Building Great Relationships with Faith, Skill, and Virtue in the Age of Social Media* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015).



great starting point for any pastor seeking to sharpen his interpersonal skills. Published in 2015, this resource is a 126-page manual that is thorough in its explanations, but never overstays its welcome with overstating its topic. The theme of this guide is stated in its conclusion saying, “Great interpersonal relationships, including friendships, result from a fascinating combination of God's grace and our efforts.”<sup>3</sup>

Quentin Schultze was a professor of communication at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He earned his Ph.D. in communication from the University of Illinois. Since taking a break from teaching, he now is a full-time writer on topics of mass media, leadership, interpersonal communication, and public speaking.<sup>4</sup> Diane Badzinski serves as professor of communication at Colorado Christian University. She earned her Ph.D. in communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.<sup>5</sup> In their collaboration on this book, both authors’ expertise is undeniable.

This guide is separated into nine sections to teach the reader how to enhance their own interpersonal skills. The sections are as follows: Be Grateful, Listen Attentively, Single-Task, Know Yourself, Relate Openly, Encourage Others, Promote Peace, Restore Relationships, Celebrate Friendships. Each section also includes grey boxes filled with numbered ways for people to improve interpersonally e.g., Seven Signs of Poor Listening.<sup>6</sup> Ten Reasons We Lie.<sup>7</sup>

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3. Schultze, *Essential Guide*, 126.

4. Information retrieved from his professional website: <https://quentinschultze.com>.

5. Information retrieved from her faculty of Colorado Christian University spotlight page: <https://www.ccu.edu/spotlights/faculty/dbadzinski/>

6. Schultze, *Essential Guide*, 17.

7. Schultze, *Essential Guide*, 62.

Six Ways to Affirm Others.<sup>8</sup> These lists are found throughout the book and help keep the writing precise and efficient in its goal to educate on communication.

I believe this is a must-read for any Christian who wants to enhance their communication skills. The only negative is that some of the theology found in this book is inaccurate with the teachings of Scripture, adding ideas that God did not say. That can be ignored. The real benefit is found in the examples given and the clear definitions provided.

*I Never Thought of It That Way* by Mónica Guzmán<sup>9</sup>

Mónica Guzmán is a journalist and the director of storytelling at Braver Angels, an organization seeking to bring unity between both sides of the political spectrum in America. Having studied journalism as a 2016 fellow of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University<sup>10</sup>, she is thoroughly equipped at asking questions and understanding the complexities of humanhood. Her book, published in 2022, offers expert insight into the art of observation, asking intentional questions, reading people, and showing genuine concern for others.

The title serves as a reminder to the reader about openness in conversation. She writes much about her time as a journalist and how she was able to incorporate her journalism skills into her personal life, and how the tactics she learned in journalism served her well in her interpersonal communication. “It didn’t occur to me until recently, but every one of my now

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8. Schultze, *Essential Guide*, 76.

9. Mónica Guzmán, *I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2022).

10. Information retrieved from the inside jacket of the book *I Never Thought of It That Way*.

thousands of interviews was something everyone craves but rarely encounters: a conversation bent on understanding without judgment.”<sup>11</sup>

Where Guzmán shines is in her ability to continue the conversation through questions which help her better understand people. She shares her philosophy and tactics for how to do this, which can be especially valuable for the pastor socializing in the narthex after service, getting to know visitors who came to church, and understanding the needs of a member coming to him for counsel. She offers memorable acronyms such as LOOP (listen for, observe, offer, pull)<sup>12</sup> for the reader to use and help himself in conversation until it becomes his social muscle memory.

The only warning I have about this resource is the coarse language Guzmán uses in her writing. It is not very often, but it can be alarming at certain points. This kind of talking would be inappropriate for a pastor, but it can be ignored while reading as she makes her points clear.

Amanda Ripley, author of *High Conflict*, endorses this book on the front cover by calling the guidance inside “actionable.” She is not wrong. The advice given by Guzmán can be incorporated right away in the life of anyone who interacts often with people, especially pastors.

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10. Guzman, *I Never Thought of It That Way*, xx.

11. Guzman, *I Never Thought of It That Way*, 94.

*Getting Along with Difficult People by Friedrich Schmitt*<sup>13</sup>

In order to be a better interpersonal communicator, there are attitudes one must avoid. But a pastor will not always be able avoid other people who have these attitudes. In fact, many of these people will be his own congregants and students. How can he deal with them? How can he help them? Since it is his job to serve them, how can he be around them without being infected by their attitudes? Friedrich Schmitt offers such advice with clear examples that can easily happen in pastoral ministry.

In his book, Schmitt describes eighteen different kinds of people that pastors will deal with in ministry: gossipers, know-it-alls, super-Christians, oppressors, soul cobblers, helpers who need help, authoritarians, snoopers, the lovely, glib advisers, preachers, quacks, problem solvers, guilt hunters, windbags, pretenders, quibblers, and private eyes. Schmitt states, “When Paul urged the Galatians (6:2) to “bear one another’s burdens” he was writing to an entire congregation, not to a chosen few within the fellowship... the greater part of such bearing and sharing of burdens which afflict the lives of many has, by default, fallen to clergymen.”<sup>14</sup> Schmitt states the duty of pastors, whether they like it or not, is to bear with one another, especially his members. But based on the eighteen different kinds of people he describes in this book, some descriptions do not seem so bad on the surface. One may ask, “What is wrong with being a problem-solver? What is wrong with being a super-Christian?” But once one reads what Schmitt really means by these labels, the frustration of these kinds of people can easily be understood.

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12. Schmitt, Friedrich, and Ralph W. Sockman. *Getting Along With Difficult People* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1970).

13. Schmitt, *Getting Along*, xi.

I was skeptical at first about using a book published in 1970 about interpersonal communication. I was worried that it would not resonate since culture has changed drastically since then. My skepticism was put at ease within the first few pages of reading as he described things that happened in the 1900's that still happen today within the church. His warning to ministers to flee from gossip is one that pastors still need to be reminded of, for they are not immune to it. In this book, Schmitt shows the interpersonal dangers a pastor can fall into which can lead to a lack of trust from his congregation, an uncomfortableness from his members, and how a minister of the Gospel can destroy his reputation in a flash. In a more 2000's term, Schmitt is telling pastors to constantly "check themselves" of these behaviors, and if they see that they do it, repent and correct it.

Besides the date of publication and the older vernacular used in this writing, there are no negatives to report from this work. The way Schmitt separated the different kinds of difficult people without much overlap was appreciated. His warnings for pastors, as well as his encouragements, were thoughtful, sincere, and educational. If a pastor wants to know where he can start with a member who shows one or more of these kinds of behaviors, this is a good resource. It also can be a sobering resource to the pastor who finds these attitudes in himself, but it can also help him correct his ways.

*Communication Skills for Ministry by John W. Lawyer and Neil H. Katz*<sup>15</sup>

At the time of its publication in 1985, John W. Lawyer was the President of Henneberry Hill Consultants, Inc. in Pompey, New York. Neil H. Katz was the Director of the Program in

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15. Lawyer, John, and Neil Katz. *Communication Skills for Ministry*. 2nd edition. (Dubuque: Kendall Hunt Pub Co, 1985).

Nonviolent Conflict and Change at Syracuse University. Based on their professions, their applications for communicating can be trusted.

This is not only a book for reading, it is a manual that includes journal space which the reader can make use of. The book also has communication exercises accompanied by fill-in areas the user could write in. The inclusion of exercises is what makes this resource valuable.

Different exercises for the reader to practice and take notes are found in each chapter. The chapters cover seven main areas of interpersonal communication with ministerial applications: Learning, Communication, Information Sharing, Reflective Listening, Problem Solving, Assertion, Conflict Management. The chapters are thoroughly written having many examples of situations that can occur both in ministry and everyday life, and a variety of responses that the authors explain what makes them appropriate or inappropriate.

While this is valuable, its layout is more a compilation of continuous workshop sheets than a conventional book. This can be either a positive or a negative depending on reading opinion. The authors make the reader do a lot of work outside of reading. The worksheets can be helpful, but the advice within the situational examples are superb. This may serve better as a workshop source at a weekend conference with someone leading a group through the material than a solo read. The interpersonal advice given with concrete examples makes this a beneficial resource “for anyone in a people-serving ministry.”<sup>16</sup>

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16. Lawyer, *Communication Skills for Ministry*, vi.

*StrengthsFinder 2.0* by Gallup<sup>17</sup>

This is one of the most popular books of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for understanding one's own personality and strengths. There is a reason it is so widely used by professionals across the world: it is precise in its description of each strength and personality. With its thorough precision in its descriptions, people can easily identify their strengths since the book is so encompassing.

Many workplaces make this required reading for its employees in order to create a cohesive team where everyone's skills are maximized. WELS churches and schools make use of this too. Many have utilized this resource for synergy among the teachers within a school and also among associate pastors.

Especially for the pastor who struggles talking with people, making interpersonal connections, and feeling comfortable among groups, this book can help him identify why he feels that way. But for the purposes of interpersonal communication, that is where it stops. The one warning about this resource is that there is a slight encouragement to ignore what one is bad at and to focus only on maximizing what one is good at. It is about identifying and capitalizing on strengths after all. But that is the opposite to the purpose of this paper since this project is about helping young pastors improve in an area that they may struggle in.

For the pastor that wants to improve their struggling interpersonal skills, he can use this to identify what he is already good at and what kind of personality he has, but should ignore the advice of downplaying one's weaknesses.

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17. Gallup. *StrengthsFinder 2.0*. (New York: Gallup Press, 2007).

### Other Resources

The podcast “A Bit of Optimism” hosted by Simon Sinek<sup>18</sup> serves as a wonderful example of what good interpersonal communication looks like. Communication, especially of the interpersonal nature, is often the topic he discusses with his guests as Sinek interviews people whom he views as inspirational in their leadership and serving skills. Sinek also serves as a great example of good question-asking as he gets to know people while making them feel safe, welcome, cherished, and heard. The young pastor can learn from Sinek’s intentionality as he interpersonally communicates with his guests and also discusses his own philosophy in communication.

The best resources a young pastor can use for advice about pastoral ministry: older pastors. That means that the best resources for a young pastor to use, who wants to improve his interpersonal communication skills, are experienced pastors with strong interpersonal ability. They are the ones who understand ministry and God’s people within ministry. And since pastoral ministry is people-focused, these are the men that can help guide a young shepherd with advice on how to best communicate with people.

For this project, seven pastors with over five years of pastoral experience were interviewed. Some of these men served as circuit pastors and helped guide younger ministers in their circuit who struggled with feeling awkward and socially anxious. Some of these men even admitted to feeling socially anxious themselves and gave sound advice for how they overcome it. A few of the men are quoted in this paper.

One can ask almost any pastor about their feelings towards ministry. Many pastors respond saying, “Ministry is fun!” But to many shepherds, what makes it fun? The people are

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18. According to the host, it is available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever one gets their podcasts.



what make it fun. Interacting with people is fun. Socializing with the flock is fun. Learning more about people is fun. Helping God's people through their problems, as strange as that sounds, even that can be fun. Interpersonal communication does not have to be scary. With the right tools and experiences, and with the help of God who comforts and uplifts even the most frightened pastors, the young shepherd can improve his interpersonal skills to the glory of his Lord, and he himself may even say, "Yes, ministry with God's people is fun."

## UNDERSTANDING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

This section of the paper is devoted to understanding what interpersonal communication is, how it is studied, and the role it plays for pastors of all ages. This area of communication is studied at a variety of secular institutions, but many of their findings can be applied to shepherds of souls.

### **What Interpersonal Communication Is**

In the most basic terms, interpersonal communication is an exchange of information between two or more people. It encompasses not just words but facial expressions, posture, movement, and nonverbal cues. Not all interpersonal communication is face-to-face conversation. Some of it can also take place through social media platforms.<sup>19</sup> Though, for the sake of this paper, the focus of this research will be on in-person, face-to-face interaction.

This is a highly studied area of communication among academic institutions. According to the Moody College of Communication at The University of Texas at Austin:

Interpersonal Communication involves the study of both the processes and effects of social interaction, usually in face-to-face situations. Both verbal and nonverbal behaviors are studied in laboratory and naturalistic contexts. Cognitions, emotions, and discourse patterns occurring during conflict, lying, and persuasion are some of the factors

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<sup>19</sup>19. This definition is based on the descriptions given by the schools of communication at the University of Houston, the University of Central Oklahoma, and the University of Texas at Austin.

<https://www.uh.edu/class/communication/undergraduate/undergraduate-degrees/comm-studies/interpersonal-communication/>.

<https://www.uco.edu/programs/cla/program-interpersonal-communication-major>.

<https://commstudies.utexas.edu/areas/interpersonal-communication>.

commonly studied. Communication in health-related contexts as well as personal and family relationships are two important contexts in which theories are applied.<sup>20</sup>

This specific area of communication is all about relationships. Interpersonal communication can be thought of as a game of catch between at least two people. By starting the game of catch, how does one start a conversation? For the one catching the ball, how does he receive the information that has just been given to him? Then, by throwing the ball back to the one who started the conversation, how is he responding? Conversation is simply a game of catch, going back and forth between two people.<sup>21</sup> Interpersonal communication is transactional. It is a dynamic process between two people created by their interaction.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, interpersonal communication is not an exact science. There are not proven formulas or equations that say when you communicate one way this exact reciprocation will happen to you. It is better to think of communication as an art than a science. Equations cannot be improved, they simply mean what they mean. But art can always be improved, and communication as an art should be developed.<sup>23</sup>

Elza Venter, an education psychologist at the University of South Africa, writes that communication “is an everyday activity at ‘the core of all human contact’ fundamental to human life. It helps us to build relationships with others through mutual understanding.”<sup>24</sup> On the same

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20. <https://commstudies.utexas.edu/areas/interpersonal-communication>.

21. Of course, conversation, like a game of catch, can be between more than two people.

22. Westerik, Henk (January 2009). "Adler, R. B. and Rodman, G. R. (2009). Understanding human communication (10th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press". *Communications*. **34** (1): 103–104.

23. Venter, Elza. “Challenges for Meaningful Interpersonal Communication in a Digital Era.” *HTS Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (2019): 1–6.

24. Venter, *Digital Era*, 1.

page in her academic journal, she adds that there is not one individual or social system that is able to thrive, or even survive, without communication. It bonds us together as humans.

But proper interpersonal communication can vary between cultures. Things that are appropriate when communicating in one area of the world may be totally inappropriate in another. Since interpersonal communication does not only involve speaking, but nonverbal cues as well, these are not always as easy to distinguish between cultures as much as speaking does since a difference in language is much easier to detect. For example, in Western cultures a typical greeting is the handshake, especially during formal occasions. In Chinese culture, while the handshake is still standard, in formal settings they may more often bow slightly to one another. This is a nonverbal way of communicating greetings to one another, as is the handshake.

This paper will not delve in the interpersonal communication patterns of cultures outside of the United States. Since the majority of pastors in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod are American and serve in the United States, this research will mainly focus on the interpersonal etiquette of American culture.

Since interpersonal communication is more of an art than a science, that means it is subjective. How some people want to be communicated with varies in American culture. Even within churches, how certain members want to be communicated with differentiates from person to person. Some within the congregation may respond well to some of the pastors antics. Others may be bothered by it. The way a pastor speaks can be invigorating to some and offensive to others. Even his posture and facial expressions, whether he means to or not, communicates something to the flock he is serving. This takes careful practice by the pastor and he will need to do much studying of the people inside his church to know how he best can communicate with them.

Thankfully, since communication is more of an art than a science, it can be learned and practiced by anybody. It is not a “one size fits all” equation that one either gets or does not. Interpersonal communication can be taught, studied, practiced, and improved upon by anyone willing to spend the time observing and communicating.

### **The Study of Interpersonal Communication**

Many universities around the world have devoted much study to interpersonal communication. One can even get a degree in this area of communication at schools such as Trevecca University<sup>25</sup>, Grand Canyon University<sup>26</sup>, and Kent State University.<sup>27</sup> According to the website of Kent State School of Communication, interpersonal studies are covered through eight key courses: Small Group Communication, Personal and Mediated Communication, Interpersonal Communication, Family Communication, Uncertainty and Privacy Management, Relational Communication, Communication Across the Lifespan, Interpersonal Communication and Health. Each of these courses are offered for a minimum of three credit hours.

But even interpersonal communication can be narrowed into different studies. Kent State provides different descriptions of these classes on their course site. Interpersonal studies can be viewed through the lens of small groups, seeing how a group of people interact with each other in closer settings. Personal and mediated communication looks at how humans interact with their

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25. <https://www.trevecca.edu/academics/program/interpersonal-communication>.

26. <https://www.gcu.edu/degree-programs/bachelor-communications-interpersonal-human-relations>.

27. <https://www.kent.edu/comm/interpersonal-communication>.

own personal self. In family communication, the culture, patterns, and processes through which different families communicate with each other are researched and reported on. Privacy Management studies how humans decide what to share interpersonally with one another. It looks at what one may deem as appropriate and what is inappropriate in sharing. Relational communication observes how the different degrees of relationships communicate with each other, comparing and contrasting people who are strangers all the way to spouses. Communication across the lifespan looks at how one's communication can change with age and cognition. Finally, the study of health in interpersonal communication looks at the processes by which people communicate in health contexts.

The study of interpersonal communication is a good thing, but obviously only so much can be done in the classroom. A pastor could certainly be encouraged to study further into interpersonal communication. He could even be so moved to do so that he gets a degree in it at one of these universities, and use it to better serve his congregation. That could be useful to him, especially if he needs help in this area and it intrigues him. Much can be learned in a classroom setting, but it may not always be as valuable as his own observance and study of the people he spiritually cares for.

This is where a pastor must recognize the importance of interpersonal communication within his ministry setting. Pastoral work is people work. Working with people requires tactfulness in communication. Therefore, a pastor must know how to communicate properly with his flock as he shepherds them.

## THE ROLE OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN MINISTRY

In their book about communication in ministry settings, John Lawyer and Neil Katz say, “Effective communication is essential, not only for getting individual needs met and developing significant interpersonal relationships, but also for assuring the adequate functioning of people in any society.”<sup>28</sup> A church can be thought of as a miniature society. It will have its culture and its identity that sets it apart from other churches, and it will need communication for it to function. Since so much of a pastor’s job involves communication with people, it is obvious why these skills would be useful and desired by a shepherd of God’s flock. Pastors study homiletics and learn how to craft a proper sermon, but it takes practice to enhance one’s skill in it. Same with interpersonal communication. It takes practice to sharpen one’s ability to do it well. Some are naturally gifted in the pulpit. Some need to spend extra hours practicing their homiletic skills. Some men are naturally gifted at speaking to anybody. Others need work in this area to feel confident. This means that a pastor who feels awkward or introverted can certainly improve his interpersonal skills. In fact, just because a pastor finds himself to be an introvert does not necessarily mean he has bad interpersonal communication skills. The opposite can be said of extroverts. Just because a pastor perceives himself to be an extrovert does not mean he automatically has great interpersonal skills. In fact, even if a pastor tends to be more introverted in personality, he may be very good at reading faces, understanding nonverbal cues, knowledgeable of when to speak and when to listen, and capable of holding eye contact. Though

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28. Lawyer, *Communication Skills for Ministry*, 11.

the extroverted pastor may be talkative, it is possible that he may be overtalkative and not a very good listener. He may be a good speaker, but he can be horrible at getting to know the stories of others. This is just one example of poor interpersonal skills a pastor may have.

Earlier in this paper I used the example that interpersonal communication can be compared to a game of catch, going back and forth between at least two people. But, like playing a game of catch, conversation can go wrong. Imagine one person asking another person a question, and the receiver of that question does not know the answer. That is like when the thrower hurls the ball in an area where the catcher could not catch it, even though the thrower thought the catcher might be able to. Now imagine the thrower propels the ball so hard at the catcher that the catcher is injured by the throw. In a conversation, that is when the one speaking says something that hurts the one receiving the information. Like a game of catch, this can be intentional or unintentional. Finally, imagine the thrower tosses the ball to the catcher, but the catcher walks away from the game while the ball is still airborne. That is like when someone is speaking to another, expecting a response or a continuation of the conversation, and the other person just walks away from the conversation.

All three of these things can and do happen in conversation. People often ask questions of others that the receiver does not know the answer to. Harsh words hurt people and make them less inclined to continue a conversation. And even so, sometimes people just walk away from conversations because they think the conversing is done even though it was not. Or they may even walk away because they feel awkward, and instead of mustering through the awkward feeling they would rather abort the conversation than continue to experience the emotion of awkwardness.



Pastors are not immune to these kinds of responses when talking with others interpersonally. A young pastor who has just graduated from seminary may feel like he needs to know the answer to every question that is posed to him by someone in his parish. If they do not know the answer, they may feel like they have “dropped the ball” within the conversation, which can make the pastor feel awkward and even lead to self-degradation. This could drown a pastor’s confidence in interpersonal communication, making him less excited about engaging in it.

Pastors are also not immune to criticism and harsh words. He may experience an angry reception from a member concerning his sermon. He may receive a harsh reaction from one he is counseling that hurts his love for talking with God’s people. A pastor may even fail to endure a furious lecture from a member of the council, or church in general, whose words pierce the young shepherd’s heart and drown his desire to even be with and among his own members. It can also happen that a young pastor, who has just arrived at his call where he is the sole shepherd, experiences conversations that make him uncomfortable. He just lived through seven or even eleven full school years of ministerial education where he is surrounded by friends and people he knows, and in those environments interpersonal communication felt more natural.<sup>29</sup> Now since he is on his own in a new environment with completely new people, confidence in interpersonal communication may be a challenge as he might not be polished in it when interacting with strangers. When awkwardness bottles up, he may feel so uncomfortable that he would rather “rip the band aid off” by fleeing from the conversation at an inappropriate time than endure the cumbrous interaction. These can be difficult challenges for a recently ordained pastor to tread. Experience helps with these kinds of encounters, but with hardly any pastoral experience how

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29. A vicar year experience would fall within those years, but in that case he is not on his own and is not the sole shepherd of the congregation as he would have a bishop mentoring and watching over him.

can a young shepherd respond? Some pastors may respond in two negative ways to these kinds of interpersonal encounters.

### **The Cocooning Pastor**

The defeated pastor may respond a few different ways. One way he may respond is by fleeing from those situations, doing everything in his power to not experience that again, but this can lead to a failure in fulfilling his call. If his goal is to flee from and never experience confrontation or awkward situations again, he may be tempted to avoid home visits and church events, things that were in his call packet and the congregation expects him to do. This can also lead to the example the man in the introduction gave: the pastor feels more confident speaking from the pulpit and delivering a sermon in front of one hundred people than he does talking with those very same people after the service, since he does not feel awkward preaching but he does when he is greeting and visiting. “I knew of one pastor who was so scared to leave his office due to social anxiety. In fact, he said it would take him several hours to even build up the courage to make a phone call.”<sup>30</sup> The temptation can also grow to make himself busy in his office where, instead of using that place as an area for study and preparation, it becomes a room more for solitude and escape from interaction; his safe space from confrontation or awkward encounters.

That is not to say it is wrong for a pastor to go to his office for time to recharge. Sometimes he will need a break from his flock in order to be a good steward of his emotions. Human interaction can be draining on the mind. Interpersonal communication can be exhausting and the pastor may need some alone time to regather himself. But if his office with “all the work

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30. Interview with WELS pastor wishing to remain anonymous, interview by author, November 6, 2022.

to be done” becomes an excuse to neglect his members, that is wrong, especially when his call packet has specifically requested of him to be present with members. Here the pastor is responding as, what I will call in this paper, a “cocooner.”<sup>31</sup> He flees away to his cocoon to avoid social interaction and does not partake in face-to-face interpersonal communication as often as the congregation would expect him to.

The young pastor may even become convinced that this is right for him to do. He may be tempted to think to himself that since he is not so skilled at face-to-face conversation, instead of working on it, he can just work harder on his Bible studies or his sermons. This can be viewed as the “easy way out” though. Of course a pastor should be working faithfully on his Bible studies. Of course a pastor should be studious and precise in crafting his sermons. But that is where he must tread carefully and ask himself, “Am I neglecting my other duties by spending extra time doing this? Am I neglecting the other needs that my flock has called me to serve them for?” Being absent among the congregation at events, using sermons or Bible studies as an excuse to not be in and among the members, is not an excuse at all.

### **The Erupting Pastor**

Another way the pastor may respond to criticism, harsh words, or awkward encounters is by doing the opposite of fleeing and cocooning. He may instead “erupt” back at the situation, that is to say, assert dominance over the person he is talking to. This is the alpha male approach. He may think to himself, “I am the pastor. I just did all these years of school and now they have the audacity to talk to me like that.” In this way the pastor may respond to harsh words with piercing

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31. This term is inspired by Schultze and Badzinski’s work in *Essential Guide*, 42.

words back. To criticism, he may criticize the individual talking to him or even a group of people in order to feel like the field is level and that all parties are just as guilty as he is. Or even when he is caught in a conversation that makes him feel awkward because the person he is conversing with does not recognize the same social cues that he does, he may try to take over the conversation by talking about things that only he himself is interested in, or shifting the conversation towards himself since that will make him feel less awkward. As opposed to the “cocooner,” this I will call the “erupter.”

The erupter is not as common as the cocooner, but it still can be a temptation among pastors. Since a pastor is given charge over a congregation, much of the time at a relatively young age in his mid- to late-twenties, he may feel the need to prove himself as “the man” who cannot be pushed around. This type of behavior also needs to be drowned out from the pastor’s practice. In this way he may lose the confidence and trust that his members have graciously given him. In these types of moments a pastor must also ask himself who he is serving, himself or God’s people. It would be wise for the erupter to keep in mind the words of John Baptist when he was talking to his own disciples about Jesus, “He must become greater; I must become less.”<sup>32</sup>

Another reason a young pastor may respond as the erupter is because he feels like that is how a pastor is supposed to respond, and he has been conditioned to think that way based on his experiences at seminary and during his vicar year. It is not uncommon for a seminarian to see how pastors interact with each other at symposiums and district conventions. There are times when a pastor may go up to the microphone at these gatherings and speak harshly, and sometimes those harsh words are inappropriate and out line. Yet, to the student who hopes to be a pastor one day, this can condition him to think that this is how pastors talk. They need to be

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32. John 3:30 NIV.

authoritative. They need to use a harsh tone. This may carry over into that seminarian's thinking and when he is a pastor, he may communicate this way to the disappointment of his congregants or students, and to the detriment of his interpersonal communication skills.

### **Positive and Negative Interpersonal Examples in Ministry**

Disappointment in a pastor's interpersonal skills is not an uncommon experience for some WELS members. A few lay members who I talked to while researching for this project described pastors who have served them in the past both as cocooners and erupters. To some of them, their perception of a few of their previous pastors were negative. Descriptions of some pastors who were cocooners were "antisocial", "cowardly", "not present", "weird", "unlikable", "impersonal", "lazy", "hard to get a hold of", "reclusive", and "not a leader."<sup>33</sup> Some even described that while their pastor was a gifted preacher and had pretty good Bible studies, they never got to know him since he often was not available and did not ever stay long at the church's social events.

There was some overlap of descriptions with the cocooner, but the erupter had a few distinct descriptions from some WELS lay people. "Alpha male", "know-it-all", "my way or the highway", "selfish", "annoying", "scary", "rude", "demeaning", "always talked about himself", "unpredictable", "you never knew what would set him off."<sup>34</sup>

Yet, there was one description that was overtly apparent when lay members described both the cocooner pastor and the erupter pastor: "hard to talk to." In both cases, members

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33. WELS laymen wishing to remain anonymous, interview by author, November 6, 2022.

34. WELS laymen interview.

struggled to communicate well with their pastors since their pastors lacked positive interpersonal skills. In some cases the pastor could not hold a conversation well. In others he talked about himself so much he was never asking any questions. Some pastors fled from social interaction and criticism. Others would talk without listening and fire back at any criticism towards him.

Both the cocooner and the erupter would be examples of negative interpersonal responses. Avoiding conflict and awkwardness does not solve any issues and sometimes can lead to those situations festering. But also, returning harshness with harshness does not solve problems either. Where is the balance? How does a young pastor respond to people with positive interpersonal practices?

“Human communication isn't just about sending and receiving messages. It's about sharing our lives. It's about friendship rather than loneliness. It's about flourishing in community including interpersonal relationships with family and friends.”<sup>35</sup> Here Schultze and Badzinski open their guide to interpersonal communication with what it is all about: sharing. But here, sharing does not necessarily mean talking. Positive interpersonal communication does not just share words, it shares an ear. When a pastor has positive interpersonal communication skills that means he is not just a good conversationalist, he is a good listener. He is willing to share his time to hear the thoughts of others. He shares or lends his attention by allowing his sheep to convey the things on their hearts to him. The pastor with good interpersonal communication skills works to not fall into the trap that so many do when it comes to listening. In fact, Stephen Covey argued that most people fall into this trap when he wrote, “Most people do not listen with the intent to

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35. Schultze, *Essential Guide*, 1.

understand; They listen with the intent to reply.”<sup>36</sup> Positive interpersonal communication skills include the ability to listen in the moment without the mind focusing on what the reply will be.

But not all listening is good listening. One must be careful with how they are listening and the attitude that they listen with. Schultze and Badzinski mapped out seven signs of poor listening. They are judging and others too quickly and harshly, jumping to premature conclusions, responding thoughtlessly, basing opinions of others on first impressions, failing to set aside one's biases and prejudices, seeing reality solely from one's own, limited perspective, and focusing on self-centered agendas.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, good listening not only avoids constantly thinking of a reply while the speaker is talking, but also avoids quick judgment and jumping to premature conclusions. It involves letting oneself gather thoughts and information before concluding something about someone else. It also involves grace and giving others the benefit of the doubt. When listening, a pastor should employ the explanation of the eighth commandment that Martin Luther gives: “take his words and actions in the kindest possible way.”<sup>38</sup>

Good listening also involves not pushing one’s own agenda within a conversation that he is clearly the listener of. This can fall into the category of listening to reply instead of to understand. A positive interpersonal skill is replying with more questions that further the thought of the speaker instead of moving the conversation in the direction that listener wants it to be.

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36. Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 251.

37. Schultze, *Essential Guide*, 17.

38. Martin Luther. *Luther’s Catechism : New International Version* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 97.

Schultze and Badzinski also offer seven ways to be an effective, interpersonal listener: Intentionally choose to listen. Generously carve out a sufficient period of time. Carefully choose a distraction free place. Patiently stay in the moment. Openly accept others' feelings. Remain empathetic and put yourself in the shoes of others. Give the listener visual support by genuinely smiling and nodding.<sup>39</sup>

Being intentional and patient with one's listening is paramount. While listening may feel passive it actually is an active response. Not thinking about what else is on the calendar or agenda for the day. Not crafting a response and rehearsing it in the head while waiting for the speaker to be done. Intentionality and patience while listening takes effort and focus, but it improves one's interpersonal skills twofold. It is said that Professor Siebert Becker refused to check his watch while he was in a conversation with a member or student to ease them and show his intentionality to the conversation.<sup>40</sup>

Another improvement to listening is understanding the meaning of your nonverbal cues. Eye contact is important, but not necessarily always essential. While it is a normal response for the speaker to look around during his turn to converse as he is retrieving the thoughts he is trying to speak, it is not usually proper for the listener to look around during the conversation. If eye contact is too much of a distraction for the listener, or the two conversationalists are in a loud area where it can be hard to hear each other, the listener may instead not make eye contact but visibly show that he is attentive to what they are saying by leaning an ear closer to the speaker .

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39. Schultze, *Essential Guide*, 22.

40. This is according to Pastor Caleb Schultz, interviewed by author, November 5, 2022.



One particular professor while I was a student at Martin Luther College employed this tactic. When he was serving as my advisor and we had meetings, while we were sitting across from each other, he would fold his hands, look down and off to the side, and lean in with his ear while I was speaking. It was not because he was hard of hearing, but it was to help him clearly hear every word that I would say without the visual distractions. He still gave other nonverbal cues as well by nodding. I never once felt like he was not listening to me even though he would not make eye contact while I was speaking.

Other nonverbal cues that can improve one's interpersonal skills involve awareness of one's posture. While sitting, it may be comfortable to place one's hands behind the head to rest, but while in conversation this does not create a neutral ground between the two parties. The hands behind the head is what is called a "power pose."<sup>41</sup> Power poses can create a dominant/submissive dynamic in the conversation in which the party that feels subservient may become uncomfortable. This can be evident in their nonverbal responses such as closed and tight posture as well as in and out eye contact.

One thing that I realized I often do is cross my arms in conversation. While this is relaxing to me and a comfortable position, this is another one of those power poses that could be intimidating to another person. While I served as vicar at Hope Lutheran Church in Toronto, it was my practice to stand outside the door of church and welcome people to service as they walked in. I had to remind myself often to not cross my arms, even if I was cold, since that is power pose and can, to some people, make me appear to be closed off. I never wanted to convey that to my members, especially as I was welcoming them to worship.

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41. Abele, Andrea E., and Vincent Yzerbyt. "Body Posture and Interpersonal Perception in a Dyadic Interaction: A Big Two Analysis." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 51, no. 1 (2021): 23–39.

One final nonverbal cue that goes a long way in interpersonal communication may be obvious in theory, but can be forgotten in practice. The affirmation the speaker receives from the listener when the listener smiles and nods is undeniable, but it can be easy for the listener to forget to do this within conversation. Sometimes it can just be easy to forget to smile in general even when one is happy. It is important for people who want to improve interpersonally to recognize what their facial expressions are conveying, especially when they are in conversation with someone else. One can be listening well by taking in the information given, empathizing, and staying in the moment, but the nonverbal facial expressions may not match the intentionality.

It is good for a pastor to remember that his facial expressions may not always match his mood. He may be happy, but his face may also rest in scowl and the vast majority of the world population would not recognize that expression as happiness. It would be awkward for a pastor to frown while he preached to his congregation the peace of the gospel. It would be uncomfortable for him to beam a giant smile while he spoke direct law to his flock. In the same way a pastor is trained to change facial expressions with the mood of his sermon, this is just as important in conversation. Our resting faces can send nonverbal messages that we do not intend. Awareness of this is vital.

One final area of interpersonal communication is called reporting. There is both positive reporting and negative reporting in conversation. Schultze and Badzinski list seven types of evil reporting that all people who want to improve their interpersonal communication skills should avoid. Back-biting is when someone speaks against absent persons. The busy body is someone who seeks out the personal information of others and spreads it like wildfire. The complainer is specifically someone who faults others without taking any accountability. Murmuring is grumbling about another. The slanderer is one who injures the reputations of others. The tale

bearer is one who elaborates to make a story more dramatic. And the whisperer is the person who talks privately about others to hurt them.<sup>42</sup> For the benefit of one's own personal communication skills, these types of reporting need to be avoided.

The old Adam always needs a reminder. Pastors are not immune to these kinds of behaviors. Pastors can be tempted to fall into these areas of reporting as easily as any other sin. Especially since the shepherd himself is working closely with people, it may be extra enticing to him to fall into these pitfalls of interpersonal communication. He is going to get to know the deeper issues of his people. His members may even confess things to him that they will never tell any other human on earth. Sometimes the precious information of others and their reputations will be in his hands. He must exercise the most extreme caution with what he does with that information.

The pastor can easily fall into back-biting as he is at conferences surrounded by his brother pastors. Though he may view it as "getting things off his chest", if he is not actually presenting questions of casuistry about the situations for better ideas of how to handle a situation, then all he is doing is speaking against absent people, his own members.

Being a busy body and spreading the private information of others will call into question the pastor's ability to stand above reproach. Friedrich Schmitt talked about the importance of confidentiality as a pastor, "For no good reason, two prominent ministers told a layman about the marital problems of another pastor. Is it really possible that these ministers, with all their schooling and knowledge, could overlook what is found in the proverbs of Solomon? "Do not reveal another person's secret" (Prov. 25:9).<sup>43</sup>

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42. Schultze, *Essential Guide*, 64.

43. Schmitt, *Difficult People*, 2-3.

Schmitt also gave further advice to pastors who may act, as Schultze and Badzinski describe, like a busy body, murmurer, slanderer, or whisperer:

The first thing that a person...needs [from a pastor] is someone who will stand by without flinching, someone who will take an entrusted secret with him to the grave. The pastoral counselor cannot be urged to strongly- as a matter of principle- not to talk with anyone about the affairs and confidences of another. When people question him, he should remember that it is his duty to keep his mouth shut. This will inspire the confidence of his people. It goes without saying that such matters of confidence must be kept even from his own wife. This will not put a strain on his marriage; indeed, it will strengthen it.<sup>44</sup>

Of course there are certain legal things a pastor may have to share with authorities when they are confessed to him, but even then, that information must only be shared with who it is absolutely necessary to share it with.

The last aspect of reporting is one that may be the easiest for many to fall into: complaining. Some people may view complaining as a good conversation starter. Everyone has grievances they would like to air. Though complaining can make for lasting conversation, it does not mean it makes for good conversation or even good interpersonal skills. Complaining may be thought of like a cigarette. It feels good in the moment, it may even become addicting and one might start to rely on it, but in the long run it is harmful. Complaining is not a positive form of communication, though it may sometimes bring people together. It harms one's interpersonal skills and most of the time makes no contribution to solving a problem.

The example of a pastor's conference can be used again. A pastor may feel, since he is surrounded by his brother pastors, that he is in a safe space to complain with them. It can even become a competition between the pastors of "who has it worst." A young pastor, fresh out of

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44. Schmitt, *Difficult People*, 3.

the seminary, may even witness this and think this is how pastors talk to each other: by complaining. But the more he partakes in complaining the further away from good interpersonal skills he gets. Complaining promotes negativity. Negativity pushes people away. The last thing a pastor wants is to push people away from the Word of God because of his own personality.

Complaining must be kept in check. A good question a pastor can continually ask himself is, “Will what I say in this complaint benefit the kingdom of God in any way?” Most of the time, with some minor exceptions, the answer will be no. In all aspects of a pastor’s life he must ask himself if what he is doing benefits the kingdom of God, and if he clearly knows that it does not, he must turn away from that activity. As Saint Paul writes, “So whether you eat, drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”<sup>45</sup>

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45. 1 Corinthians 10:31.

## HOW CAN A YOUNG PASTOR IMPROVE HIS INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

There are a variety of tactics a young pastor can employ to make himself a more effective communicator and enhance his own interpersonal skills. The first step is one of the hardest to do, and that is to be honest with oneself. “In interpersonal communication, others might perceive us differently than we perceive ourselves. To put it differently, our self-identities can deceive us. For instance, we might be overlooking a bit of a jerk inside each of us.”<sup>46</sup> As I have stated in earlier sections of this paper, the pastor must ask himself questions about his own interpersonal skills. Some of these questions may include: Are my members comfortable around me? Am I available to my flock with an open door? What does my resting face look like? Am I capable of doing small talk? Am I intentional with my listening? Do I rehearse what I am going to respond with while the other person is talking? Am I a gossip? Do I complain frequently? Am I a cocooner? Am I an erupter? Am I an introvert? Am I an extrovert? Have I neglected any social aspect of my ministry? How often do I let my members talk, or do I do most of the talking? Do my members trust me to be confidential? Am I an alpha male? Do I always need things to be my way? Am I a true leader? Are my behaviors predictable to my members? While extensive, this is not a full list of all the questions a pastor should ask himself in this realm. But this does give an idea of the questions he should be asking himself about his own interpersonal communication.

Next, after the pastor has asked himself questions about his own personality, he then must remind himself that he is not going to be perfect at this. No one is a perfect interpersonal communicator, even the most social of people or the most emotionally skilled. Seeking absolute

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46. Schultze, *Essential Guide*, 42.

perfection in this area may cause him to become overly disappointed in himself when he realizes that he cannot possibly be perfect at this. He may also begin to expect interpersonal perfection from others, which is another guarantee for disappointment and may even lead to unnecessary frustration towards those he is interacting with. Instead he must just work on continual improvement. “Perfectionism damages our relationships when we hold ourselves, if not others, to an unrealistic ideal. Then we get so frustrated that we become anxious, impatient communicators.”<sup>47</sup> Schultze and Badzinski also call this kind of thinking “communicative realism” which is an honest sense of everyone's limited communicative abilities and related communicative imperfections and is a lot healthier emotionally and spiritually than idealistic perfectionism.<sup>48</sup>

Then, it would be good for him to do some study of his own personality. In an interview, Pastor Mark Henrich of Hope Lutheran Church in Toronto stressed the benefits of the book *StrengthsFinder* for a young pastor to read. He believes that a young minister of the gospel needs to know the specifics of his personality in order to best serve his people. Pastor Henrich endorsed the use of the book and the test that accompanies the book in order for a young pastor to best know what his personality strengths are and where he can further grow. This resource can help a young pastor understand the parts of his personality that help him interpersonally and the ones that can hinder his interpersonal skills. Though Pastor Henrich endorsed the use of this book, one word of caution he had is that book emphasizes working on your strengths and encourages the reader to more ignore their weaknesses. But if a pastor recognizes that before reading and uses it to still improve on his weaknesses, then the book is an excellent resource.

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47. Schultze, *Essential Guide*, 31.

48. Schultze, *Essential Guide*, 32.

Once the pastor understands the different parts of his own personality, he then can take the next step. Though the task may seem large at first, the pastor should start to try to get comfortable with what is called “small talk.” Not always, but generally this is something introverts do not like to engage in, but it is the way many people begin communication and is normal practice in American culture. It will take some time to get comfortable with or even tolerate, but being able to engage in it is beneficial as it begins the journey of social interaction between two people, and it can be detrimental if this step is skipped.

In October of 2022 I was at a gathering when someone new arrived to the event, but when the person arrived he introduced himself and then said to some in the group, “Let’s skip the small talk. What are your dreams, goals, and ambitions?” Though I believe he meant well, the group became rather uncomfortable because the social step of small talk was skipped. The conversation then felt forced, and people did not want to engage in such a deep and personal topic with someone they had just started speaking to a minute beforehand. Since no one had the opportunity to “warm up” to this person, they were less inclined to speak with him the rest of the night as his questioning seemed rushed and off-putting.

Think of small talk as the warm up. It helps one get to know another on a surface level, but every social interaction has to start somewhere. This warm up can also lead to further questions in which the pastor can deepen his understanding of his parishioner. Once small talk has been started more questions can come out of it, but most of the time it needs to start small, otherwise the other person may become uncomfortable with the conversation and less willing to talk with the pastor again. But even a small effort can generate social momentum. Journalist Mónica Guzmán shares her thoughts about asking questions and engaging in small talk:

As conversations generate fuel, they also spin up something else: a connection. If two people are talking, they are in a relationship that has the potential to grow deeper.



Always. You never know when a hi at the grocery store, your order at the drive-thru, or the comments on your social media page might be the first of many exchanges you'll have with someone you're grateful to know. Even a small bit of connection goes a long way, as the knowledge you share and the gaps you fill reveal points of commonality that stitch you together.<sup>49</sup>

Pastor Caleb Schultz who serves at Crown of Life Lutheran Church in Mississauga, and is self-proclaimed introvert who had to learn how to enjoy small talk, has a word of advice for pastors that they can do in the first few weeks at their congregations:

You do need to think through your conversations before you have them. This is something that I have to do, maybe it's because I'm an introvert, maybe it's because I'm awkward, but I do have to think through my conversations...I will think about people who I know will be at church...I will think through that person and what can I ask them about before I see them...It's like practice. It's like thinking through your shot before you take it...That thinking through things to talk about with people makes it so much easier for me to get into a conversation because once I'm in a conversation you play off each other, you react to what they say but the getting started is the hardest. If you can think through a number of things to ask people about, or even just one thing for each person then that is usually enough...you've shown the person that you care. If that's the least you can do, that's what you can manage, one question for each person you know. Even if you have to take some time on your Saturday to write it all down and look it over in the morning, if that's what it takes for you.<sup>50</sup>

The pastor should also start focusing on his own curiosity. He should be intentionally curious about his members while conversing with them, this will help him become more comfortable around people. Guzmán adds, “Everyone is unbelievably interesting. Once you are addicted to asking questions you become addicted to getting to know people.”<sup>51</sup> How can a pastor show curiosity and intentional care about the lives of his members? Ask for their stories. Again, this is not what he should lead with, but once the “warm up” is complete this is an excellent way

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49. Guzmán, *I Never Thought of It That Way*, 79.

50. Pastor Caleb Schultz interview.

51. Guzmán, *I Never Thought of It That Way*, xx.

to go. “We all have our stories, but everyone’s got their story. So that’s the key...find those questions that open up another person to tell their story because everybody loves to tell their story, even the quiet people. And that is something that can really be developed and worked on.”<sup>52</sup> Curiosity of others should be as important interpersonally to a pastor as nourishment is to him physically. “When you're hungry, you need to eat. When you are thirsty, you need to drink. When you're curious, you need to *know*.”<sup>53</sup>

Once this kind of contact has been established with the members, the pastor now is an acquaintance with these members he is getting to know. The next thing he can do interpersonally is be a friend to them. This is not to say he will be their “buddy” or “pal.” But he should be a neighbor to them, friendly and kind. One way he can do this is by focusing on what his nonverbals convey. Kindness is not only shown through action and word, but is often portrayed through facial expression. Since the pastor cannot observe his own face all the time, it may be wise for him to ask someone he trusts to evaluate his facial expressions over the weeks as he engages with members before and after church. It could be his wife, the church president, or someone else who has his confidence. They can watch for what his resting face looks like. Is it inviting or is it repellent? Does it express focus on the person he is talking to, or is it obvious that his mind is somewhere else?

In the area of nonverbals, he can also keep in mind his posture as he talks to people. He should remember to avoid high power and low power stances such as crossed arms or legs and slouching while sitting. Instead, a way to convey his attention is for him to relax his shoulders, keep his stance open, leave arms at his sides (or rest them on the table if sitting), and make eye

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52. Pastor Mark Henrich, interviewed by author, November 6, 2022.

53. Guzmán, *I Never Thought of It That Way*, 63.

contact without staring. It is also important for him to nod, assuring the speaker that he is listening.

It then is important for the pastor to be aware of habits to avoid such as gossip, frequent complaining and chronic negativity, as well as excessive discouragement. If he overhears gossip within his congregation it is best to evangelically shut it down, and be far from joining in on it. Even when he attends conferences with fellow pastors, it would be detrimental to his interpersonal skills to contribute to any gossip that may arise.

While there can be a time and a place for complaining, he must not make use of it often, and should have the intention of trying to fix the problem he is complaining about if he does so. Complaining for the sake of complaining can also hurt his interpersonal skills. He should avoid using complaining as a conversation starter. If he feels as if he is in a constant negative mood in which he wants to complain often, it would be wise for him to seek counseling, and if necessary, take medication to combat depression.

He should also be very careful about the amount of discouragements he sends to his members. Of course, if people need to be reprimanded for sinful behavior then it is his call to point out their sin and also point them to their Savior. But if he only airs discouragements while rarely offering encouragements, this is also a hinderance to his interpersonal communication. “For every teaspoon of discouragement we probably need a glass of encouragement, or we begin to lose heart.”<sup>54</sup>

One of the best ways for a pastor to love and serve his members and also enhance his interpersonal skills is by thinking of precise and direct encouragements to give his members. This can be done in a variety of ways. He should thank the organist for his or her work, and do it

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54. Schultze, Badzinski, *Essential Guide*, 73.

consistently. In fact, he should do it weekly. Even if he thinks to himself, “They already know I appreciate them. She plays so much already.” It does not matter. The encouragements should keep flowing from the pastor’s mouth on a consistent basis. If there is a group of musicians that played, it would be best if the pastor thanked each musician individually instead of thanking the group as a whole. Of course, this may take more time, but it will be much more beneficial in the long run and will make each musician feel even more encouraged since the pastor did so on a personal basis.

This goes for all those serving in the church. The ushers, the greeters, the tech team, and anyone else serving on a Sunday should be thanked for their service to God’s house, and individually. In some churches the practice is that everyone is thanked after the service right before the announcements, and often times the entire group is thanked in front of the congregation as opposed to individuals. “I would like to take a moment to thank all our musicians today. Our tech team. Our ushers. Our greeters. They really are what keep this service going. Let’s show them our appreciation!” The congregation then claps, but this is not as interpersonally effective to the ones serving as a direct encouragement from the pastor would be after the service. The best thing the pastor can do is thank and encourage each individual after the service, even when no one else is in earshot. “John, thank you for playing organ today. I know I say it every time you play, but I really do appreciate your dedication to this. It means so much to me.” “Maddie, I love that you are serving on the tech team. I don’t completely understand how all this technology runs, but I am so happy that you do! You are gifted at this. Thanks for helping make the service run smoothly.” “Tom, you are just the right guy to be our usher. Thanks for being so helpful especially to our visitors. You help make this church a calm place.” “Judith, I love your smile in the morning when people are coming in for worship! If I was

a visitor and you were the first person I saw, I know I would feel so welcomed. Keep up the great work at this. It is so good having you as one of the first faces people see when they arrive.”

These are not all-encompassing encouragements, but they do follow a formula for encouraging people. They are individualized and they are specific. These encouragements call the people by name, give a specific example of what they have done, and are followed by a thank you or compliment. The pastor can follow this formula and can adjust and adapt it as he becomes a better interpersonal communicator and encourager.

One thing he should keep in mind though is the difference between encouragement and flattery. Those who flatter others tend to do so for selfish reasons. When he is encouraging, the pastor should keep in mind that it is not for his members to like him more or so that they give compliments to him. Encouragement is simply giving. The flatterer wishes to get something out of his words. The encourager uses his words to build others.

As the pastor encourages his people with the Word of God, so he also can encourage them with his own genuine words. May his encouragements be uplifting and true. And through his encouragements, may the body of believers entrusted to him feel seen, loved, and cared for by their shepherd who watches over them and does not fear interacting with them interpersonally.

## CONCLUSION

In his first letter to his mentee, Paul, an experienced pastor, writes to Timothy and reminds him of what is expected of a pastor:

Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.<sup>55</sup>

Timothy himself was a young pastor who did not have nearly as much experience as Paul, yet Paul still encouraged him on the ministerial path. Paul never tells Timothy that in order to be a pastor he must have sensational interpersonal skills. Some of his qualifications could fall into the interpersonal list such as being temperate, respectable, and hospitable, but Paul never tells young Timothy that he must not fall into awkwardness.

Everyone falls into awkwardness, whether by their own doing or because of the situation they have found themselves in. Since pastors work so closely with people, they are bound to create or to come upon awkward situations. Yet nowhere in Paul's description does he encourage Timothy to ever hide from God's people. In fact, by telling him to be hospitable, Paul tells Timothy to be open and caring to those souls entrusted to him, even if he feels awkward.

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55. 1 Timothy 3:1-7

Not every pastor needs to be the most outgoing man. He does not need to have a big personality or be the most likable person in every room. He simply needs to be faithful in serving God's people and lead everything he does with God's love. By improving his interpersonal communication skills, God can use that to serve him and his kingdom. By being a pastor who neither cocoons nor erupts, but instead is patient, present, and intentional, God can use that in ways that only he knows how. And in this way, young pastors in their first five years of ministry can serve God and his people with contagious joy, interpersonal confidence, and loving hearts for people who do not scare him, but bring him joy to be around.

May the young pastors of God's church be kind, confident, and loving. And may they not just keep it to themselves, but may they wear this joy on their face, showing the Lord's flock, even with their nonverbals, the gentleness of their heart. And may they share this joy in the Lord not just homiletically from the pulpit, but interpersonally in the narthex, the parking lot, and the community. May God, who is the giver of all things, bless us with this confidence to interact with his people, and joyfully serve him.

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