

# Theology and Practice of



## **“the Divine Call”**

A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations  
of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

February 2003

## Abbreviations

AC = Augsburg Confession

Ap = Apology of the Augsburg Confession

SA = Smalcald Articles

Tr = Treatise on the Power and Primary of the Pope

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# THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF “THE DIVINE CALL”<sup>1</sup>

God has established the office of the public ministry (*Predigtamt, ministerium*) for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel in its purity and administering the sacraments in accordance with the Gospel (AC V). While these are not the only duties a holder of this office may perform, they do constitute the heart and core of the office.<sup>2</sup> The office is a divinely established “means,” in a sense, for the administration of the means of grace. As Christ has established the office of the public ministry, so he also places individuals into that office (AC XIV). Accordingly, this placement into the office of the public ministry has been designated historically as a “divine call” or “call and ordination.”

<sup>1</sup> In 1992 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod requested that its Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR), “in consultation with the Council of Presidents and representatives of our Synod’s terminal schools,” prepare a single document that answers questions and concerns regarding “the theology and practice of ‘the divine call,’ utilizing the writings of C. F. W. Walther (i.e., his book *Church and Ministry* and essay ‘The Congregation’s Right to Choose Its Pastor’).” In this request the Synod specifically asked the Commission to address the practices—together with their theological foundations—for the placing of individuals into, or removing them from, their office or location of service. The Synod mentioned issues such as the “initial placement of candidates, dismissal from office, retirement, the appropriateness of the term *divine call* for those serving in elected and appointed offices, etc.” (1992 Res. 3-09A “To Study Theology and Practice of ‘the Divine Call’”). It should be noted that the 1992 resolution does not call upon the CTCR to revisit its 1981 document *The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature* (See 1998 Res. 7-14A “To Address Nomenclature of Church Workers,” in which the Synod commended the CTCR’s 1981 report to congregations and professional church workers for study.). *The Ministry* is online at <http://www.lcms.org/ctcr/docs/ctcr-01.html>.

The present document takes as its point of departure the theological and practical questions regarding a man’s call into the office of the public ministry, which consists in the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments (*Predigtamt; ministerium docendi evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta*). This “is the divinely established office referred to in Scripture as ‘shepherd,’ ‘elder,’ or ‘overseer.’ This term, the office of the public ministry, is equivalent to ‘the pastoral office.’ Within this office are contained all the functions of the ministry of Word and sacrament in the church” (*The Ministry*, 12). Conclusions may then be drawn about calls of individuals into auxiliary offices to the extent that these participate in and support the office of the public ministry. As the Commission has noted in its 1981 report, auxiliary offices are those established by the church: “Those who are called to serve in them are authorized to perform certain of the function(s) of the office of the public ministry. These offices are ‘ministry’ and they are ‘public,’ yet they are not *the* office of the public ministry. Rather, they are auxiliary to that unique pastoral office, and those who hold these offices perform their assigned functions under the supervision of the holders of the pastoral office. Such offices are established by the church as the need arises, and their specific functions are determined by the church” (*The Ministry*, 12).

<sup>2</sup> See AC XXVIII, 21, which teaches that the ministry of Word and sacraments consists in forgiving sins, rejecting doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel, and excluding from the fellowship of the church ungodly persons whose wickedness is known—and doing all of this without human power, simply by the Word. *Iuxta evangelium* (according to the Gospel) refers to the task of the clergy in Apol. XXVIII, 12.

# THE BIBLICAL WITNESS

The New Testament says very little about the exact procedures for placing someone into, or removing someone from, the office of the public ministry (or any other offices, for that matter). Nevertheless, some principles may be drawn from information given in certain narratives of the New Testament.

## The Gospels

In Matthew 10 and Luke 9 Jesus commissions his disciples to a limited sphere of service—initially among the Jews in Palestine but with implications for their later ministry—though nothing more specific is said.<sup>3</sup> This call anticipates a commission of the twelve disciples with an expanded authority that proved to be unlimited in scope and not bound by time. At the end of Matthew Jesus commissions them to make disciples of all nations (28:16-20).<sup>4</sup> In the Gospel of John Jesus establishes the ministry after his resurrection by breathing on his disciples to give them authority to forgive and retain sins (20:19-23). Though few specifics are given in these passages from the gospels regarding the call, the Lutheran Confessions use them and other references as a scriptural basis for the establishment of the pastoral office.

## The Acts of the Apostles

In Acts it is clear that the disciples served in their office as apostles until death. Acts also reveals that the apostles served the proclamation of the Gospel in various locations at different times, as they were summoned by God either directly (vision of Peter) or through the people in keeping with their needs.

<sup>3</sup> These texts are the only places in the gospels where the disciples are called apostles.

<sup>4</sup> This latter text, it should be noted, remains a subject of considerable debate. Do the apostles represent the holders of the office of the public ministry or do they represent the entire church, pastors and people alike (cf. Matthew 10 and 16)? It seems that until the twentieth century most exegetical writings understood Matthew 28 with reference to holders of the office distinct from that of the laity. In the twentieth century this passage became more popular as a mandate that addresses every individual Christian. The view that this passage refers to a group larger than the twelve—i.e., the church—is found in *A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod*, adopted by the Synod in 1932. Recent exegesis has returned more to the previous view by noting that Matthew identifies two distinct groups of Jesus' followers, so that here we have only the inner circle of disciples present. At best, the issue remains ambiguous and continues to be a matter of discussion.

The first task confronting the apostles following Jesus' ascension into heaven (Acts 1:20-23) was the selection of a person to fill the vacancy left by Judas. In words from Psalm 109:8 [Septuagint, 108:8] the apostle Peter declares, "His office let another take" (20). Peter lists two criteria (22) for the individual who would take Judas's place: (1) he must have been present from the beginning of Jesus' ministry; and (2) he must have been a witness of the resurrection. The community puts forward a short list of two names: Joseph, called Barsabbas, and Matthias. The disciples call upon God "who knows the hearts of all" and then cast their lots "as a mechanism for determining God's choice"—a practice that had been traditional in Judaism<sup>5</sup> and present in the Old Testament (1 Chr 25:8f.; 26:13f.).<sup>6</sup> Matthias becomes the first person selected for the work of the Gospel in the Book of Acts. He was then "counted in"<sup>7</sup> with the other eleven disciples. His selection as an apostle was not merely a human decision.

The selection of seven men (Acts 6:1-6) to assist the apostles describes the emergence of a new group of devoted Christians leading to an increase in the number of believers. Although their first task of providing for the poor in the community was administrative, they also turned out to be prophetic preachers. In fact, "they are portrayed as *prophets* who continue the work of the twelve: they are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, they preach God's word, they work signs and wonders among the people."<sup>8</sup> Stephen disputes with the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem. Philip preaches in Samaria and Judea, where he catechized and baptized—tasks entrusted to the original disciples.

How were the seven selected? The twelve first summoned the assembly of disciples and told them to "pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3). The word translated "of good repute" (*martyroumenos*) in this verse means to have one's actions or character attested by others (cf. Lk 4:22; Acts 10:22; 16:2; 22:12; 1 Tim 5:10; and 3 Jn 12). The disciples then prayed and laid their hands on the seven, a practice by which they signal the transfer of authority.<sup>9</sup> Luke's

<sup>5</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina Series, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, Vol. 5 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 37.

<sup>6</sup> See C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 1:104, for examples in post-biblical Judaism of the casting of lots.

<sup>7</sup> The Greek term used here, *synkatapsēphizomai*, has the sense of being "enrolled."

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, 111.

<sup>9</sup> In Acts the gesture accompanies the bestowal of the Spirit in baptism (8:17, 19; 19:6), healings (9:12, 17; 28:8), and commissioning for ministry (13:3). It appears in sacrificial rites (Ex 29:10, 19; Lev 1:4; 4:15; 16:21) and in Num 8:10 as part of the ordination of priests. Also, through this gesture authority was transferred from Moses to Joshua (Num 27:18-23; Deut 34:9). People were then to obey Joshua.

account may well embody “the method of appointing ministers that was familiar to Luke himself: popular choice, approval by those already ministers, and the laying on of hands. He would think this a good pattern to follow—the pattern that must have been followed in the past.”<sup>10</sup>

Paul was called into service directly by Jesus, as was perhaps also James, the brother of Jesus (1 Cor 15:7-8). The selection of Paul was exceptional because he was called as an apostle before Ananias baptized him, laid hands on him, and prayed (Acts 9:1-19). Paul received a thorough training prior to embarking on his missionary and apostolic work.

He may very well have served as a pastor, perhaps in Arabia (Gal 1:17), before Barnabas found him in Tarsus and brought him to work in the church at Antioch (Acts 11:25-26). Together they delivered to Judea a monetary collection for the poor (Acts 11:27-30).

After delivering the collection to the needy in Judea, Paul and Barnabas are back at work in Antioch and thoroughly involved in the life of the local Antiochean community where they labored, prayed, and fasted for the next year (Acts 13).<sup>11</sup> The Holy Spirit then calls for Paul and Barnabas to be set aside for mission work in what is now Turkey. The congregation fasted, prayed (cf. Lk 2:37; 5:33; Acts 14:23), and then laid hands on them (Acts 13:3). One scholar suggests that this is not to be identified with a rabbinic ordination, but it is more generally an “installation” by which a man is placed “in a particular sphere of service that differs in some respects from that previously occupied.”<sup>12</sup>

At the end of the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas revisited the churches that they had established (Acts 14:21-23), strengthening the disciples and exhorting them to remain faithful. They also appointed elders in every church. The word used for “appointed” in Acts 14:23 is a participial form of *cheirotoneo*.<sup>13</sup> The verb *cheirotoneo* means, literally, “to extend or stretch out the hand.”<sup>14</sup> The critical question here is this: who

<sup>10</sup> Barrett, 1:304.

<sup>11</sup> See Johnson, 220, 225-226.

<sup>12</sup> Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (Naperville, ILL: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1961), 25c. See also Eduard Lohse, *Die Ordination im Spätjudentum und im Neuen Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1951), 71-74.

<sup>13</sup> We might note that Paul also uses the word *cheirotoneo* to refer to the selection or appointment of Titus as a representative of the churches in 2 Cor 8:19.

<sup>14</sup> In classical Greek this word was used in several instances for “expressing agreement in a vote” (Eduard Lohse, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [TDNT], s.v. *cheir*, 9:437.). Barrett notes that *cheirotonein*, “to stretch out the hand,” was used to designate voting in a deliberative assembly (e.g., Plutarch, *Phocion* 34 [758], for acquittal or condemnation), and voting as in an election for the appointment of a person to an office (e.g., Xenophon, *Hellenica* 6.2.11). Barrett concludes, “From this kind of democratic appointment the word came to mean an appointment by an authority (e.g., Lucian, *De Morte Peregrini* 41....); so here. Paul and Barnabas provided the elders for the disciples whom they were thereby helping to withstand the troubles they were sure to encounter (v. 22).” Barrett, 1:687.



does the appointing or selecting? The context would indicate that Paul and Barnabas did the selecting or choosing, thereby appointing the presbyters for the churches in Pisidia and Lycaonia. New Testament scholar C. K. Barrett contends that “this was, no doubt, a kind of ordination, in that it gave some Christians a special kind of responsibility and service; cf. 6:6; 13:1-3; 20:17, 28.”<sup>15</sup>

Once again the combination “fasting and prayer” accompanies the appointment, as was the case with the appointment of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:2-3. They are presented to the Lord. The verb *paratithēmi* in this passage (14:23) carries the sense of presenting to another for safekeeping, that is, “to entrust.” So, the new ministers are presented or entrusted to the Lord for safekeeping.<sup>16</sup>

St. Paul’s usual practice must have been to appoint ministers in the churches that he had established. He speaks of the Ephesian elders or bishops as having been appointed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). This suggests that they were placed into their offices by the same rite or process used for appointing elders in Antioch (Acts 14) and at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:2, 22, 25). In Acts 15:22 Luke reports that “it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.”

## The Pauline Epistles

Paul makes reference to the call of ministers in all of his epistles, and especially in the greetings where as an apostle he lists himself with Timothy and Silas who share in his ministry (Phil 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; cf. 1 Cor 1:1). Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus) primarily to give instructions regarding the ministry and its functions, and eligibility for service in this office in the post-apostolic period. He gave to Titus (1:5) the task of appointing ministers to churches that he had established—a responsibility that he often assigned to his co-workers (2 Tim 2:2; 1 Tim 5:21; cf. 2 Cor 8:16-19). It seems as if the apostles and their successors (such as Titus and Timothy) were more concerned with the qualifications of the candidates for the ministry than they were with setting down a once-and-for-all procedure for selecting them. Paul and his assistants took the initiative in selecting candidates and the churches testified to their character. In this way, the whole church—pastors and people—was involved in the selection of candidates for the ministry and guarded against those who would usurp the office.

<sup>15</sup> Barrett, 1:687.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, 255.

## Summary Observations

As we summarize the biblical data that pertain to the call into the public ministry of the Word, we can say in general the following. First, the biblical writers give us several pictures of how the church actually went about the process of selecting pastors in “normal,” settled situations. Second, the texts that address the issue are largely descriptive and narrative in character. This raises the difficult hermeneutical question as to whether these texts are unique to themselves, or whether they provide normative guidance for the church in all times and places. In any case, however, they do not provide any explicit directives regarding the practice of the call. Any guidance drawn from these examples, therefore, will necessarily have to be inferential.

We may further conclude that the New Testament appears to be more concerned with the qualifications and characteristics of the individual called to serve than with the procedure for placing him into office. It also seems more important for the church to know that the man who occupies the pastoral office has been placed there by God (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 4).

## THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

The Lutheran Confessions emphasize that one must be rightly called in order to function in the public office of the ministry, but they do not say much about how this is to be done or what this means. The clues they give can be illuminated by what the reformers did historically. In general, the Confessions stress two points: pastors are not self-appointed; and, bishops are not the exclusive ones who may ordain. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession deals primarily with the former while the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope takes up the latter.

### Augsburg Confession and Apology XIV

As we consider Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession, it is important, first of all, to note where this Article appears within the Confession. Articles I through VI set forth the Reformation message based on the theology of the ancient church and her creeds. That message then shapes the ecclesiological portion of the AC (Articles VII through XVI). In these articles, the reformers demonstrate that the Lutherans were not establishing a

new church, but were making their claim to be church.<sup>17</sup> AC VII and VIII provide a definition of the church as the assembly of believers gathered around the Gospel that is preached and the sacraments administered. Articles IX through XIII describe those sacraments together with their purpose in arousing and strengthening faith. Article XIV addresses the question of who preaches the Word and administers the sacraments (IX-XIII) within the assembly (AC VII and VIII). AC XV deals with the antitheses of AC VII on churchly traditions. AC XVI speaks of the relation of the church to the wider society.

Article XIV confesses that to serve within the church (that is, in the office of the public ministry) one must be “rightly called” (*rite vocatus*). This brief article, however, does not elaborate on what the “rightly called” means or involves.

The Roman Confutation approves AC XIV, but with a stipulation. The first draft of the Apology acknowledged this when it formulated the Confutation’s proviso in the words, “that ordination be performed by bishops (*ut ordinatio fiat ab episcopis*).” In its final form the Apology restates this condition as follows: “as long as we use canonical ordination (*si tamen utamur ordinatione canonica*).” The Apology, however, points out that episcopal ordination is not available to the Lutherans because Roman bishops refuse to ordain pastors for them. The implication “is that they may have no alternative but to avail themselves of ordination by clergymen in presbyter’s orders.”<sup>18</sup> Melancthon would make this very point in the Treatise. For now we note only that in 1530 “rightly called” referred to a procedure that required nomination by a medieval bishop and the approval of local patrons, noble or municipal. This becomes somewhat clearer in the Treatise.

## Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope

Although Lutherans were not unwilling to accept ordination from papal bishops, they were being deprived of such ordination as a form of punishment. Melancthon in the AC had already alluded to this.<sup>19</sup> The refusal of the bishops to ordain was an attempt to confine the spread of Lutheranism. By 1537 the situation had become quite serious. The progress of the Reformation depended on supplying recognized pastors for the congregations. When bishops refused to ordain, the Lutherans responded that the church could no more be deprived of pastors than it could be deprived of preaching, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper, or any other gift that the

<sup>17</sup> See Charles P. Arand and Paul Raabe, “Evangelical and Catholic Ecclesiology for Tomorrow,” *Lutheran Forum* 31(Spring 1997): 19-22.

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “The Sacred Ministry and Holy Ordination in the Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church,” in *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue IV: Eucharist and Ministry* (LWF, 1970), 114.

<sup>19</sup> See Conclusion to Part I of the AC, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 58-60.

Lord intended for the church (pastor and means of grace go together).

There was no question that Lutherans must have pastors. Nor was there any doubt that they should be called and ordained. But how do Lutherans obtain pastors? Under Roman polity, only bishops could ordain. But they refused. In response to the bishops' refusal Lutherans ordained their own pastors.<sup>20</sup> Philip Melanchthon's treatise is a theological rationale for Lutherans to undertake the ordaining of their own pastors. He tackles the issue in two ways. First, he stresses the unitary character of the ministry. Second, he emphasizes that since every pastor possesses the full authority of the office, any pastor may ordain. The question in the Treatise, therefore, is this: who may call and ordain? And it should be remembered that the main point at issue is the authority of bishops vs. pastors in territorial churches, not the authority of local congregations vs. the pastor.

While the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope spoke to the question of the equality of bishops over against the Roman claim to the supremacy of Peter as the first pope (Tr 1-59), the supplemental and companion treatise on "The Power and Jurisdiction of Bishops" speaks to the equality of all clergy, bishops and pastors (Tr 60-82). According to Roman tradition, priests could administer five of the seven sacraments, with confirmation and ordination reserved for the bishops.

Melanchthon does not call into question or address the issue of the ministry's existence by divine right (*jure divino*). However, he does question the post-apostolic differentiation of grades within it by the separation of the presbyterate from the episcopate and, by implication, the subsequent introduction of the initially lay office of deacon into the major orders of the sacred ministry. These developments, he insists, exist only by human right (*de jure humano*).<sup>21</sup>

The terminology of the Confessions recognizes

an inevitable hierarchical structuring of any social institution like the church, but this does not have to do with inherent spiritual authority. They use the term "bishop" both for the head of the medieval diocese and—on analogy of the episcopal "parish-sees" (*paroikiai*) of the first three cen-

<sup>20</sup> Piepkorn refers to the Ordination Register at St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg that provides data on 1,979 clergymen ordained between 1537 and 1560. He notes that at least 1,025 of these were recruited from other professions and crafts. "The Sacred Ministry," 112.

<sup>21</sup> On the confessional use of *de jure divino* and *de jure humano*, see Paul L. Schrieber, "Church Polity and the Assumption of the Authority," *Concordia Journal* 26 (October 2000), 326-33. It might also be noted that here the reformers had Jerome on their side, which explains why Trent stepped softly around this issue. See also Thesis 8 "Concerning the Holy Ministry or the Pastoral Office" in C. F. W. Walther, *Church and Ministry*, trans. J. T. Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987), 289-302.

turies—for the chief pastor of a town. They also use “rector” (*Pfarrherr*); “presbyter”; “pastor”; “preacher” (*Prediger*, especially to designate assistant clergymen), “priest” *sacerdos/Priester*; and “minister” ([*Kirchen*]diener).<sup>22</sup>

Regardless of their title (pastor, elder, teacher [doctor], preacher, minister, and occasionally bishop, though almost never priest),<sup>23</sup> all ordained clergymen have the same basic authority to discharge the duties of their office (AC XXVIII, 8, 21; Tr 60-61, 74). Thus pastors are often classified with bishops. The implication is clear. If pastors share the same authority as the bishop, then they can ordain others into the ministry.

After addressing the unitary character of the office and the equality in authority of pastors with bishops (Tr 60-65), Melanchthon turns to the issue of obtaining pastors for the churches (Tr 66-78). Repeatedly he uses several terms in order to describe the process: the right of calling (*jus vocandi*), the right of choosing (*jus eligendi*), and the right of ordaining (*jus ordinandi*). At times he refers to all three together, “call, elect, and ordain” (Tr 67),<sup>24</sup> and at other times he simply uses two expressions, “elect and ordain” (Tr 67, 70, 72). The terminology here indicates that the entire church is involved in obtaining pastors, people through election and pastors through ordination. Moreover, Melanchthon describes those who are called, elected, and ordained as competent (*tuchtige Personen*, German text of Tr 72)—which presumes some form of determination of their fitness.

Taken together, the terms used by the Treatise constitute and explain the “rightly called” (*rite vocatus*) of AC XIV. At times they each appear to have their own distinctive function, while at other times one term may embrace all the others by synecdoche.<sup>25</sup> Significant is the bracketing of “calling, choosing, and ordaining” under the singular noun “right” (*jus*) in Tr 67 and of “choosing and ordaining,” again under the same singular noun in paragraphs 67, 69, and 72. Arthur Carl Piepkorn notes that “both *vocatio* (‘calling’) and *ordinatio* (‘ordination’) are extensively used in this

<sup>22</sup> Piepkorn, 109.

<sup>23</sup> See Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions, 1529-1537*, trans. Gene J. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 236-38.

<sup>24</sup> See Gerhard Forde, “The Ordained Ministry,” chap. in *Called and Ordained: Lutheran Perspectives on the Office of the Ministry*, ed. Todd Nichol and Marc Kolden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 117-36. Forde notes that in confessional Lutheranism ordination “involves not just one but at least four operations: the call; the examination; the laying on of hands; and prayer” (130).

<sup>25</sup> Synecdoche is a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole or the whole for a part.

period to describe the whole process of election and ordination.”<sup>26</sup> When these terms are laid alongside one another, a distinction may be discerned between them but the distinction cannot be made into a hard and fast rule. The “right of choosing” (*jus eligendi*) refers to the nomination and selection of an individual. The “right of calling” (*jus vocandi*) designates the actual request or call of the individual to serve. The “right of ordaining” (*jus ordinandi*) refers to the act by which one is placed into the public office of ministry.<sup>27</sup>

**The Right of Choosing** (*jus eligendi*). With the coming of Luther’s reforms new attention was paid to the teaching of the candidate, with the result that some ecclesiastical constitutions prescribed lengthy examinations for those who were about to be called to the pastoral office. The examination certified the competence of candidates according to the apostolic admonitions (*tuchtige Personen* of Tr 72). Together with the trial sermon, the examination stressed the importance of the proclamation of the Gospel that stood at the heart of the pastoral ministry. One is not to peddle personal opinions but to proclaim the public message of the church. The examination (*examen pro candidatura*) was for the office of the doctors/theologians. Generally speaking the theological faculty carried it out. At other times the superintendent had the responsibility for examination. Martin Chemnitz also performed examinations in his role as superintendent. The process culminating in examination most closely corresponds to what we in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod call certification.

**The Right of Calling** (*jus vocandi*). The church calls properly qualified men to the office. The call comes “from without,” that is, through the congregations and structures to be served. In a sense, then, the call is a public matter. The process of choosing does not necessarily refer to a democratic type of procedure like an election by all qualified adults, male or female, in a congregation. During the period of the Reformation, the call derived from a church was effected through various means (councils, magistrates, princes, those acting on behalf of the church). A superintendent or prince would frequently nominate or choose someone for a congregation, or perhaps a consistory of laymen would do this. The congregation may have had little input, but it was not excluded. The sheep must approve the shepherd. The church agendas of the day frequently mentioned the importance of a congregation not having a pastor imposed upon them. They have a

<sup>26</sup> Piepkorn, 114. In footnote 23 on this page Piepkorn cites Luther in a sermon of 1524: “But we who already have ministries will recommend [others] into our ministry. . . . If . . . we know a devout man, we take him out and by virtue of the Word that we possess we give him the authority to proclaim the Word and to administer the sacraments. This is what it means to ordain’ (WA 15, 721, 1-5).”

<sup>27</sup> See Ap XIII. Gerhard Forde has a helpful discussion of what ordination involved and meant over against a Roman Catholic understanding. See “The Ordained Ministry,” 128-35.

right to give their assent and approval but full democratic theory was not a part of their world.

*The Right of Ordaining (jus ordinandi)*. Ordination marked the conclusion of the process of preparing a man to be a pastor. It referred to the rite or ceremony in which the office was conferred. "With the approval of the community they [the pastors by emergency procedure] from then on in regular order (*deinceps*) commit the office to others."<sup>28</sup> The laying on of hands (to designate this person) accompanied prayers that the Holy Spirit attend to and empower the new ordinand's exercise of the office. Ordination involved the laying on of hands and the promise of the congregation to receive this man as Christ's undershepherd. Ordination by existing bishops is permissible, but it is not necessary (SA III, 10, 1). The ordinator was the local pastor (*pastor loci*), usually Johann Bugenhagen (pastor at Wittenberg 1523-58 and Luther's confessor). Superintendents took the place of bishops in ordaining pastors.

We may note at this point that the occasional modern practice of having non-ordained persons participate in the laying on of hands may lead to a misunderstanding of ordination. Though done in justifiable zeal to counter the view that the ordained have the power to bestow special gifts of grace, the practice undercuts the institution of the public office. "It is consonant with the public nature of the office that those who are entrusted with its care in the church are also the ones who ordain."<sup>29</sup> The point is that those who have been entrusted with the exercise of the pastoral office also care for its future and see to its perpetuation.

## Examples of Sixteenth Century Practice

We are able to get a glimpse into how the Lutheran confessors selected pastors by examining the church orders or constitutions (*Kirchenordnungen*) of the sixteenth century. In some cases, churches continued the old ways of obtaining a pastor. Nobles continued to exercise their right of nomination and presentation of candidates to the church and the church continued to confirm and ordain or install. Evangelical princes had the final right of approval, but local ecclesiastical superintendents (such as Joachim Mörlin) found a place within the process as did some Evangelical faculties. The people of the congregation may have had a minimal role, but

<sup>28</sup> Luther ("Concerning the Ministry" [1523], *Luther's Works*, American Edition [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958], 40:36) translated by Norman Nagel, in "The Office of the Holy Ministry in the Confessions," *Concordia Journal* 14 (July 1988): 291. This entire issue of *Concordia Journal* is devoted to the subject of the office of the public ministry and has several excellent articles on the topic.

<sup>29</sup> Forde, "The Ordained Ministry," 131.

they were never without some role. At the very least, they had the right of refusal or veto power over a candidate. A few examples may suffice.

In the heartland of Luther's Reformation, the domains of the Ernestine branch of the Wettin family, the grandsons of Elector John the Magnanimous, the confessor of Augsburg, issued instructions for ecclesiastical visitors in 1554. These instructions laid down a procedure for replacing a pastor who had died. The elders (*Kirchenveter*) of the congregation were to inform the ecclesiastical superintendent of the area within a day of the pastor's death. He then was to provide pastoral care through a neighboring pastor for a month. During that month the superintendent, together with the members of the congregation (*Pfarrkinder*) and its noble patron, was to designate a candidate for the pastorate. This candidate was to preach two or three times in the congregation. If the entire congregation, or a good majority of them (along with the noble patron), found him acceptable they were to inform the superintendent in writing. This report was to include an evaluation of the candidate's teaching and life, his nature and conduct. The superintendent would then obtain princely confirmation of the call, after which he could proceed with ordination, if necessary, and installation. Such a candidate was also to submit to a theological examination before the court preachers of the dukes and his chaplains, with a trial sermon (often called a *Probepredigt* as one part of their review).<sup>30</sup>

In Albertine Saxony, to which the electoral title and the lands around Wittenberg passed in 1547, procedures were similar, although with variations. Town councils and congregations were to choose their pastors and then send them to the superintendent. The superintendent would conduct the examination of the candidate's teaching and life before sending him on to Wittenberg with his and the town council's recommendation. There the new candidate would be confirmed by the elector, further examined by the theological faculty, and then ordained.<sup>31</sup> After the publication of the Formula of Concord in 1580 Jacob Andreae and his colleagues composed a new ecclesiastical constitution for Elector August. It provided rather extensive details regarding candidates for the pastoral office. Andreae and his colleagues were concerned that no congregation have a pastor imposed on them against their will. Local governmental officers were to make certain that no nomination come from the local congregation through its superintendent unless the congregation had first heard "several public sermons" from the candidate. The superintendent also had to ask the people of the

<sup>30</sup> *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Emil Sehling et al., I (Leipzig: Reisland, 1902), 226.

<sup>31</sup> Sehling, 313, 321.



congregation whether they had any objections to this man becoming their pastor.<sup>32</sup>

It must be remembered, of course, that our situation in the twenty-first century is not identical with that of the sixteenth century (e.g., government officials are not involved in the process). Moreover, the examples taken from the written constitutions express the ideals of the church leaders, not necessarily everyday practice. Also remarkable is the fact that many ecclesiastical constitutions do not provide any specific directions for the procedure.

## C. F. W. WALTHER AND THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

Because of the circumstances surrounding the founding of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, C. F. W. Walther wrote extensively on the topic of the call. The origins of the Synod's position on church and ministry can be traced to a debate at Altenburg, Missouri. Church and ministry continued to be topics of debate in contacts with J. A. A. Grabau and J. K. W. Loehe. Since Walther was responsible for the Missouri Synod's foundation and organization, he found it necessary to address the topic frequently over the years.<sup>33</sup>

### Obtaining a Pastor

A key work for this discussion of the theology and practice of the divine call is Walther's *The Proper Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation Independent of the State* (referred to briefly as *Rechte Gestalt*) in which he applied the theology of his work on *Church and Ministry* (*Kirche und Amt*) to the congregation.<sup>34</sup> Walther wrote the former work to address the question of how a congregation should order itself in a country that

<sup>32</sup> Sehling, 377-80.

<sup>33</sup> The best known of Walther's writings on this subject is *The Voice of Our Church on the Question of Church and Ministry* (*Die Stimme unserer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt*). It contains nine theses on the church and ten on the pastoral office. Walther presented these theses and the outline of a book to the synodical convention in 1851, which discussed and approved them. From this followed Walther's best-known book on the subject, *Kirche und Amt*, in 1852. In his later work *The Proper Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation Independent of the State* (*Die Rechte Gestalt einer vom Staat unabhängigen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Ortsgemeinde* [St. Louis: Aug. Wiebusch u. Sohn, 1963]) Walther applied the theology of the earlier book to the practical life of the congregation.

<sup>34</sup> For an analysis of *Rechte Gestalt*, see Norman E. Nagel, "The Divine Call in *Die Rechte Gestalt* of C. F. W. Walther," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 59 (July 1995): 161-90.

perceives the relationship between the government and church in significantly different terms than did Germany. Call procedures had to be thought through in a fresh manner from the ground up.

Lutherans have elected ministers in various ways. However, Walther does not identify any particular way as more divine or correct than another. Instead, he seeks the way that is best for the church here in America, one that we may call “the proper form” (*Die Rechte Gestalt*)—a form in which there is no tyranny of the pastor over the people or of the people over the pastor. In this way “he helps his readers recognize that they are part of a larger history, with all its resources, rather than imagining that they are alone, all there is to the church, or the first to face such problems.”<sup>35</sup>

Walther deals with the issue of the divine call in Chapter III, Part Two, under the heading “Concerning the Exercise of the Duty of a Congregation to See to It that the Word of God Dwells Richly and Prevails in Its Midst.”<sup>36</sup> He begins by stressing that it is not optional for the congregation to decide whether or not it should establish and maintain the public ministry in its midst. Appropriate care of a congregation requires that it elect and call a pastor. With this as his premise Walther then proceeds to discuss the manner of calling someone to fill the office. As he describes the process he identifies, defines, and lays out a number of the terms used during the Reformation, particularly with reference to election, call, examination, and ordination.

The election entails several steps. First, a congregation, “if possible, should seek the advice of one or more pastors who already have gained experience in the ministry, take advantage of their counseling, and entrust them with the management of the public election, provided they can be present” (63). Second, “every voting member,” those who represent the congregation, “may suggest a candidate” (63). Third, the eligibility of the candidates is to be discussed on the basis of 1 Tim 3:2-7, Titus 1:6-9, and 2 Tim 2:15, 24-26. Fourth, the one who receives most or all of the votes “is regarded and accepted as the one called by God through the congregation” (64).<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Nagel, 170.

<sup>36</sup> C. F. W. Walther, *The Form of a Christian Congregation: Presented and Published by Resolution of the Ev. Luth. Pastoral Conference of St. Louis, Mo.*, trans. John Theodore Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, Second Unchanged Edition, 1864), 62-97. The title of Mueller’s translation, which is used in the text of this document, is rendered in shortened form (see note 33). In the paragraphs that follow in this section the page references are given in the text in parentheses.

<sup>37</sup> See “Note 1” for Walther’s rationale on pastoral guidance for the congregation in the process (65-66).

On the basis of the election a document of vocation (*Vocation-surkunde*) is drawn up, read to the congregation, approved, and signed by the elders in the name of the congregation. The document obliges the pastor to preach in accord with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. In the document of vocation the congregation shall also state at the same time “that it will recognize the person called as its shepherd, teacher, and watchman, that it will accept the Word of divine proclamation from him as God’s Word, that it will obey him, love him, be at peace with him, honor him, support him; all this on the basis of the following passages [quotation of texts omitted here]: Luke 10:16;<sup>38</sup> 1 Thess. 5:12; 2:13; Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess 5:13; 1 Tim. 5:17; Luke 10:7; 1 Cor. 9:13, 14; and Gal. 6:6” (64-65). The congregation thereby has committed itself to heed the pastor as one called to speak the Word of God.

Third, there follows examination and ordination.

If the person called [*der Erwählte*: elected] accepts the vocation [*den Beruf*: call], the congregation shall present him, if possible, to orthodox pastors who already are in the ministry [office] (Acts 6:6....), in order that they might prove or examine him if this has not yet been done (1 Tim. 3:10....). Then shall they declare, obligate, and confirm him by public ordination according to apostolic order (1 Tim. 4:14....) or else publicly and solemnly induct him into his office [installation] (Acts 13:2,3....) (65).<sup>39</sup>

According to Walther, this public ordination declares that the one being ordained has been properly called.<sup>40</sup>

## Length of a Call

Walther’s thinking on the length of a call was shaped by two pastoral concerns that had arisen in the face of developments in his day that undermined the pastoral office and its work. First, in his *Pastoral Theology* (*Pastoraltheologie*) Walther cites approvingly a statement from Joachim Mörlin. Mörlin rejects the argument of those who insist that since they pay the

<sup>38</sup> This is the most frequently quoted text in the Lutheran Confessions on the subject of the office of the public ministry.

<sup>39</sup> See the German edition, *Die rechte Gestalt*, 70. N. Nagel renders the German of the last sentence of this quote as follows: “There follows public ordination, as apostolically ordered, wherein he is declared to be the one properly called, has the obligations of the office laid on him, and is declared placed in the office.” Nagel, 167.

<sup>40</sup> Instead of the term *Recht*, the Treatise (65) uses *rata* (sure, authorized, put in effect): *Manifestum est ordinationem a pastore in sua ecclesia factam jure divino ratam esse.*

pastor's salary, they can hire and fire him at will, thus treating "the call of the preacher as nothing other than a contract of the kind made with a cow-or sow-herder."<sup>41</sup> Second, Walther rejects the practice of licensing candidates for a set period of time as had been customary among Lutherans in eastern America. In 1846 he wrote, "Unfortunately it has become customary in our country to hire ministers for one year, even as we hire our servants and cattle herders. . . . Even in emergencies these calls with a time limit cannot be justified."<sup>42</sup>

On the basis of the divine nature of the call itself Walther argued against the idea of a temporary call. The very idea that a divine call could be issued for a set number of years was a contradiction in terms. Since God is the one who issues the call, it is also God who terminates a person's service in a particular location, and this for one of two reasons. First, God issues another call to that person to serve elsewhere. Second, God removes the individual altogether from office due to the false teaching or immoral life of the one who holds it.

Franz Pieper also resisted an arbitrarily determined tenure of a call. In an article in *Lehre und Wehre* (1898) he was willing, however, to distinguish between a call for temporary assistance and a temporary call. In the former case, he looked to the extenuating circumstances and the motivation behind such a call. He wrote that it is important to determine whether a congregation could issue a call for temporary assistance as a result of a pastor's "illness," "physical weakness," or "because of being overburdened with work" (for example, by taking over as a District President). In such cases, he says, the call for temporary help stays within the bounds of the divine order and has nothing in common with the objectionable "temporary call."<sup>43</sup>

Pieper rejects the so-called "temporary call," the essence of which does not consist in the idea that a call is limited as to time, but rather that human beings *arbitrarily* limit a call as to time. That is to say, they want to determine how long a pastor is to be active at a certain place. Like Walther, Pieper argues that since God places a pastor into office he also determines the length of time that the pastor serves. "If God has placed them, men dare not transfer them *at their discretion*" (emphasis added).<sup>44</sup> Pieper then proceeds to discuss two ways in which God removes an individual from office. The first is through a transfer (effected through a congregation). The

<sup>41</sup> C. F. W. Walther, *Americanisch-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1906), 427.

<sup>42</sup> Cited from *Der Lutheraner*, III (1846), 8 in Carl S. Mundinger, *Government in the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), 197.

<sup>43</sup> Franz Pieper, "Einige den Beruf zum Predigtamt betreffende Fragen," *Lehre und Wehre* 44 (1898): 339.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

second is through a deposal or removal from office.<sup>45</sup> A dominant concern again is that the pastor is not a hireling who may be discharged at the pleasure or displeasure of those who engage him.

## Termination of a Call

Walther warns in *The Proper Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation (Die Rechte Gestalt)*—which we have noted constitutes his practical application of *Church and Ministry (Kirche und Amt)*—that “congregations shall not be so presumptuous as *arbitrarily* to depose their pastors and others who administer an ecclesiastical office”<sup>46</sup> (emphasis added). In his discussion of Thesis IX on the ministry in *Church and Ministry*, Walther states that

when a pastor uses God’s Word in his congregation, whether by teaching, admonishing, reproving, or comforting, either publicly or privately, then the congregation hears Jesus Christ Himself out of his mouth. In that case it owes him unconditional obedience as the one by whom God desires to make known to it His will and lead it to eternal life, and the more faithfully a pastor administers his office, the more highly it should esteem him. A congregation has no right to depose such a faithful servant of Jesus Christ; if it does this, it rejects Jesus Christ Himself, in whose name he ministers to it. A congregation can depose an incumbent of the holy ministry only if it is clear from the divine Word that God Himself has deposed him as a wolf or hireling.<sup>47</sup>

After Walther points out that “ministers are not lords but servants and stewards of the church” in *The Congregation’s Right to Choose*,<sup>48</sup> he cautions, “This of course does not mean that pastors are miserable servants of men, whom the congregations could therefore also treat as their hired servants, and to whom they could prescribe what they are to preach and not to preach, how they should administer their office and not administer it, and whom they could put in office and depose as they please!”<sup>49</sup>

At the same time, Walther wants to protect the congregation. He

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* See P. F. Koehneke, “The Call into the Holy Ministry,” in *Abiding Word: An Anthology of Doctrinal Essays for the Year 1945*, ed. Theodore Laetsch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1946), 1: 380-82.

<sup>46</sup> *The Form of a Christian Congregation*, 128.

<sup>47</sup> Walther, *Church and Ministry*, 303-304.

<sup>48</sup> This is the title given to a series of essays by Walther that appeared in *Der Lutheraner* in 1860-61. These essays have been published in C. F. Walther, *The Congregation’s Right to Choose Its Pastor*, trans. Fred Kramer (Fort Wayne, IN: The Office of Development, Concordia Theological Seminary, 1987). A study edition with discussion questions has been published by Concordia Seminary Publications, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (1997).

<sup>49</sup> Walther, *The Congregation’s Right to Choose*, 154.

acknowledges that there may be times when there is just cause for deposing a pastor. He consistently identifies two causes for which a pastor might be dismissed from his call or deposed from the office. The first is the teaching of false doctrine. The second is the living of an immoral life. Walther summarizes his position with a citation from Martin Chemnitz.

As long ... as God tolerates His servant who preaches rightly and lives blamelessly in his office, the congregation has no right to dismiss the minister, over whom it has no authority. But when he no longer edifies the congregation, neither by doctrine nor life, but destroys it, then God Himself deposes him (Hos. 4:6; 1 Sam. 2:30). ... In that case the congregation not only can but also must remove such a person from his office, for as God calls by means, so also He deposes through means. ...” (*Loci Theologici*, “De eccl.,” 331) [emphases added].<sup>50</sup>

In one way or another, each cause for dismissal does violence to the ministry of the Word. The one does so directly by turning this ministry into something other than the teaching or proclamation of God’s Word. The other undermines the credibility of the Word.

Does Walther support removal for any reasons other than these two? Statements in Walther’s writings suggest several possibilities. In *The Proper Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation* he cites the 17<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran theologian Paul Tarnov (1562-1633) who adds two causes: “a lack of ability,” and “lack of willpower, an intolerable neglect of the official duties.”

The lack of ability embraces partly the *perversion of the sound doctrine*, especially of the fundamentals, or the *teaching of errors* that are contrary to the foundation of the faith, and partly the loss of the means by which to teach the hearers profitably and fruitfully; for example, the *loss of the powers of the mind*, caused either by accident or by illness, e.g., those of intelligence, judgment, the memory, or those of the body, such as the tongue and other members that are necessary for the administration of the office. Under lack of willpower we include both *gross neglect in the performance of the duties* of the entrusted office and *disgraceful conduct in life and morals*, whether these be offensive only to the church or also to the community” (Dedekennus, *The-saurus consil.* II, 917) [emphases added].<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in *The Form of a Christian Congregation*, 134.

<sup>51</sup> *The Form of a Christian Congregation*, 135-36.

What is not clear here is whether Walther himself includes involuntary neglect (lack of ability) in the performance of one's duties.

In his *Pastoral Theology* (*Pastoraltheologie*) Walther makes no mention of involuntary inability to perform official duties, but he does cite a pastor's deliberate unfaithfulness in the performance of his duties.

3. It is not our intention to employ our pastor like a hired-hand for just a year or two, but as the Bible directs, to regularly call [*ordentlich berufen*] him as a servant of Christ. Therefore we promise to consider him as our pastor for as long as he teaches pure doctrine, lives a godly life and faithfully performs his official duties [*sein Amt treulich verwaltet*]. However, if he becomes a *false teacher*, becomes *offensive in his personal life*, or deliberately becomes *unfaithful in the performance of his official duties* [*sein Amt muthwillig veruntreuen*], we do assert that we have the right according to Christian Church Order to remove him from office.<sup>52</sup>

We note that Walther's third cause here does not include Tarnov's mention of gross neglect.

The most extensive discussion by Walther is found in an essay presented to the Iowa District in 1879 on the topic "Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod."<sup>53</sup> In this essay he outlines for congregations the responsibilities that a synod owes to its congregations and pastors. Walther speaks about pastors who are "unfaithful" in their duties. Addressing congregations that do not affiliate with a synod and thereby consider themselves independent, Walther states that

they do not consider that they thereby jeopardize their freedom to the highest degree. After all, *a pastor can become very unfaithful* (emphasis added) in his office: lazy, careless about his official acts; he may fall into sins of drunkenness and the other great vices we mentioned earlier; he may become obstinate, so that no one can get along with him; he may become power-mad, so that everything has to be done *his way*; he may take the attitude that when he has spoken, the matter is settled; he may become lax about

<sup>52</sup> Walther, *Pastoraltheologie*, 58.

<sup>53</sup> C. F. W. Walther, "Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod," trans. Everette W. Meier, in *Essays for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 2:6-63. For an analysis of this essay in light of Walther's other writings, see David Mahsman, "C. F. W. Walther on the Proper Causes for a Congregation to Depose its Pastor," unpublished paper, 1992.

visiting the sick and may snap at people when they come to see him; and he may fall into many of the other sins that appear in the lives of pastors.<sup>54</sup>

He does not expressly state, however, that a pastor who is guilty of any of the offenses listed here ought as a result to be deposed. He does point out that “a congregation has the right to *admonish* such a pastor, and to remind him of his duty....” (emphasis added).<sup>55</sup> Such admonition, however, may be to no avail without the backing of an evangelical Lutheran synod. Two paragraphs later Walther contends,

You see, a synod will always support the congregation if it can prove that its pastor is unfaithful to his office, lazy, indifferent, immoral, power-hungry, stubborn, or is living in manifest sins. Through the District President the Synod will visit the congregation and will support those who are right. He may know best how to disarm those who support the *unfaithful, wicked pastor* (emphasis added).<sup>56</sup>

The question may be asked, does Walther’s reference here to “disarming” those who support an “unfaithful, wicked pastor” imply that a congregation has the right to remove a pastor who is guilty of any of those listed behaviors and attitudes?

In his essay to the Iowa District convention Walther seems to offer yet another reason for the removal of a pastor, namely, a domineering spirit. In Thesis II he submits that an evangelical Lutheran synod should “protect them [congregations] against pastors who err in doctrine, follow an offensive life-style, and are domineering in their office.”<sup>57</sup> As if to emphasize the point, Walther opens his discussion of this part of Thesis II by noting that his hearers should *not* think “that the congregation cannot depose anyone because of godless living and that it cannot get rid of one who *oversteps his authority and proves to be domineering....*” (emphasis added).<sup>58</sup> Walther proceeds to discuss the matter on the basis of 3 John 9-10. In this passage John mentions Diotrephes, who is a bishop or pastor who wants to be “Number One” (*philoprōteuōn*). Diotrephes

loved power and honor, was a proud and arrogant bishop. He wouldn’t even listen to the apostle John. He would say, “What do I care about him?” Then John adds, “There-

<sup>54</sup> Walther, *Essays*, 2:36.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Walther, *Essays*, 2:37.

<sup>57</sup> Walther, *Essays*, 2:25, 35.

<sup>58</sup> Walther, *Essays*, 2:35.



fore, when I come, I will remind him of what he is really doing," etc. You see, when people who had a better grasp of things than most and could therefore quickly show him up for what he was, came from other congregations to this one, he refused to accept them, even if they came with a letter of endorsement from the apostle.

When members of his own congregation insisted, "We must accept these people because the apostles have recommended them," this fellow simply excluded them from the congregation. That's the kind of scoundrel he was! That is why the apostle promises, "I will come and remind him of what he is doing," and though church history doesn't record it, no doubt John did come and flatly tell the congregation that they should remove him from office.<sup>59</sup>

What Walther says here is consistent with his earlier comments that the congregation has proper cause to remove a pastor who "oversteps his authority and proves to be domineering."

If one were to draw up a single comprehensive list of causes for which a congregation might remove a pastor on the basis of the foregoing discussion, it might look like this:

1. Teaching false doctrine
2. Offensive conduct or scandalous life
3. Deliberate unfaithfulness in the performance of official duties
4. Neglect of, or inability to perform, official duties
5. Domineering in office

It is possible to argue that points 3, 4, and 5 may in fact be subpoints under 2. Be this as it may, what these causes for removal suggested by Walther have in common is that each of them undermines the ministry of the Word.

<sup>59</sup> Walther, *Essays*, 2:37.

## CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND PRACTICES

The Scriptures show that at times God called men into the public service of his Word *immediately*, i.e., directly by his own voice without the use of human instruments, as when he called Abraham in the Old Testament or Saul in the New Testament. The Scriptures do not indicate that God intends to call men into the office of the pastoral ministry in this way down to the present day. The New Testament provides several instances when God also selected and appointed individuals to the ministry of the church through the apostles and the church (that is, *mediately*). It reports how the church selected Matthias to fill the vacancy left by Judas. It also contains Paul's instructions to Titus to appoint elders in various towns. The Lutheran Confessions (AC XIV; cf. Tr 67) likewise consistently maintain over against the Anabaptists and other "ravers" (Enthusiasts) that God calls individuals into the office of the public ministry through the church, i.e., teachers and hearers.

Since God places men into the pastoral office through the church, the call possesses both a divine and a human dimension. The call is divine in that God has taken the initiative to establish the office. It is God who calls an individual to serve the ministry of the Word within the office. And it is God who promises to bless such work. But the call also has a human dimension in that God entrusts the task of calling to human beings. They are to see to it that the office is filled in a decent and orderly manner. These two dimensions—the divine and the human—correspond to the two dimensions of the church itself. On the one hand, the church is, properly speaking, the assembly of believers gathered by the Holy Spirit around Christ proclaimed in the Word and Christ present in the sacraments. These are constitutive of the church. On the other hand, the church possesses an organizational character as its members arrange for the regular distribution of the means of grace. Although the divine character of the call is primary, the human activity by which the divine call is issued is not without importance.

As the church carries out its responsibility of serving as God's instrument for calling individuals into the office of the pastoral ministry, it must

distinguish between these two dimensions when establishing a call process. The church must always administer the call in ways that respect and uphold its divine character, while at the same time affirming the contingent character of the human procedures developed within a given context. Humanly devised procedures should not be treated as if they are divine mandates. Nor should they be carried out in such a way as to lose sight of the fact that the Lord of the church is the one who ultimately calls men into the office of the public ministry. In the history of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod the greater danger perhaps has been to take for granted the human side of the calling process, and in fact this seems actually to have happened in certain cases. Today the danger seems to be that we try so hard to find a “perfect fit” that we exhibit a lack of trust in the Lord to safeguard his church.

Until more recent times a high degree of uniformity in call practices no doubt has caused some to take the human dimension of the call for granted. District Presidents have customarily provided a list of names for congregations from which they then select and call one of the candidates, often sight unseen. However, today the increase in specialized ministries, the greatly expanded duties of pastors, the diversity of worship styles, the variety of administrative structures, the particularities of team ministry, and the growing importance of specialized skills have created the need for identifying the best candidate possible.<sup>60</sup> As a result, new elements in the call process have been developed to meet these specialized needs and the variety of processes has increased as well.

## Basic Considerations

While affirming and confessing the divine character of the call into the pastoral ministry, we must also submit the human side of the call process to closer examination and evaluation. Although these processes or procedures may be considered *adiaphora* (practices that are neither forbidden nor commanded by Scripture), it should also be emphasized that not all *adiaphora* are equal. Some practices reflect the theology of the call better than others. Some obscure the divine character of the call more than others. To provide greater clarity for implementing the call process, a set of criteria for guiding the development of procedures should be established. In light of the resources found within the Lutheran Confessions, such a set of criteria should include at least the following considerations.

<sup>60</sup> Here it should be noted that all of these factors involve the support structures of the church as a sociological entity. The assumption often is that all are theologically certified and thus would do a fine job of preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. But not all would be appropriate or suitable for the particular needs of the congregation as an incorporated institution.

*The Gospel.* The Lutheran confession of justification by faith alone on the basis of Christ's radical self-giving to us in his sufficient sacrificial death transformed the office of the ministry. No longer was it seen as a sacrificial office through which the priest offered sacrifices to God on behalf of the people or acted as a judge for rendering verdicts on people who could make recompense for their sins. Rather, it became an office whereby the pastor was responsible for delivering the gifts of Christ in Word and sacrament to those brought to faith by the Holy Spirit. The Reformation resulted in a preaching revival because it placed a new emphasis on the importance of the oral proclamation of the Gospel in its purity and the administration of the sacraments in accord with the Gospel. The emphasis thus shifted from a focus on the person of the priest to the publication of the promise. The practice of the call reflects this emphasis. In all of its facets the theology and practice of the call must be directed toward the clear, pure, and unhindered proclamation of a Gospel-bearing Christology.

*The Scriptures.* It is vital to observe that the Scriptures do not lay down one single procedure for the calling of a pastor. They supply few direct answers to the types of questions that are being asked today. Most of the biblical data consist of examples given in narrative sections of the text rather than in explicit prescriptions or mandates. This does not mean that we are unable to derive principles and guidance from these examples that are congruent with the scriptural text. But we must be clear as to when we are speaking on the basis of a specific directive, and when we are deriving principles and practices from the narratives. Still, the data provided by Scripture—whether prescriptive or descriptive—should receive preferential consideration. This is why the church utilizes prayer and the laying on of hands when ordaining a man into the office of pastor. The church today does not cast lots, though it might well consider a process like this: the candidate list is narrowed to three men (any of whom would be acceptable), the three names are placed into a hat, and one is drawn out in the confidence that God will bless the congregation through this selection.

*The Historic Practice of the Church.* In places where the Lutheran Confessions provide glimpses of the actual practices of congregations, we learn that they were cautious or conservative in their practices. This is true also of human traditions (Ap XV), public calls (Ap XIV), and the liturgy of the Mass (Ap XXVI) among other things. The Confessors respected the practices that they had inherited as catholic, and as having been proven to be tried and true. The same can be said regarding subsequent Lutheran tradition and its practices (especially within our own Missouri Synod). The practices that we have inherited should be given preferential consideration and adjusted only after the rationale behind them has been thoroughly evaluated and only when there is a compelling reason or need within the

church to do so. As in the case of the Reformers, the historic practices of the church need not dictate how we today develop appropriate calling procedures and practices, but they should shape and guide us as we go about finding appropriate procedures for the divine call in the present and future.

*The Consensus of the Church.* In a culture and society that prizes individuality and autonomy, it becomes increasingly important that congregations and Districts of the Synod not become a law unto themselves by acting in isolation and without consideration for their commitments to the wider church. Congregations and Districts need to guard against doing what they regard as expedient for their situation without concern for following through with their commitment to synodically agreed upon practices. The diversity of call procedures in the present situation is bewildering to many and in some cases has prompted ethical concerns. When responses are given to this confusion, and the effort is made to forestall it further, there is a tendency to assert as “divine” particular procedures that have always belonged in the realm of polity. And, as attempts are made to prescribe a particular procedure or to handle a specific situation, there is an equal and opposite tendency to assert the autonomy of the congregation and thus to imply that it may do whatever it wants.

*Reason and Common Sense.* When it becomes necessary to devise human procedures or policies for administering the divine call, an emphasis on human reason is appropriate. Human beings utilize all of their creaturely gifts to analyze, evaluate, and determine the how, the when, and the whom of the call. One ought not too blithely identify such a process with the working of the Holy Spirit. Neither should one dismiss its importance. An appropriate use of ministerial reason is needed to devise policies, procedures, and rites that can best express and carry out the theology of the divine call into the pastoral office. Because these are rooted in reason, they ought to be vigorously debated, thoroughly tested, and critically evaluated.

## **Administering a Call**

Throughout its history the church has consistently derived certain features of the call process from Scripture and therefore has regarded them as non-negotiable. These include the following: (1) the preparation of an individual that certifies him as competent and fit for the office; (2) the selection of an individual by the church; and (3) the ordination and installation of an individual into the office (see the section on Lutheran Confessions). The way in which these three elements are implemented, however, may vary from time to time and place to place depending on the structures and procedures established by human beings within the church.

## *Determination of Candidates for a Call*

The Scriptures affirm that a man who aspires to the pastoral office desires a good thing (1 Tim 3:1). The so-called “inner call” should be interpreted in light of this principle and should not be confused with personal ambition. One who thinks that he has an “inner call” to serve God as a pastor seeks to have that call affirmed and confirmed by the church. Clearly, his call is a *public* activity that is carried out in behalf of and for the benefit of the church. The church’s affirmation and confirmation take place through the procedures that it adopts for ascertaining a man’s fitness for the office. A man who is called must be qualified to serve in the office to which he is called. These qualifications relate to a person’s doctrine and life, for both have a vital impact upon the ministry of the Gospel. The need for certain qualifications is evident from the church’s consideration of whom to call. Acts 6, as well as Paul’s lists in Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Tim 3:1-8, include such things as being apt to teach and above reproach. To identify qualified men, the church has developed certain procedures for training and examining those who aspire to the office of the public ministry. These procedures have been, and can continue to be, adapted to meet the exigencies of each age.

## **Formation-Preparation-Education**

A ministry of the Word that engages in the teaching and preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments requires a thorough knowledge of the entire counsel of God as the theological framework within which the Gospel is conveyed as Gospel. Not every mention of Christ necessarily conveys the Gospel. It is not any Christ that bears the Gospel, but a particular Christ. The Gospel includes an incarnational Christology within a Trinitarian framework. Preaching the Gospel requires knowledge of the various Lutheran distinctions that are designed to preserve the exclusivity of salvation in the Christ revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

Furthermore, the preacher must know his audience and the specific intellectual, cultural, and spiritual impediments to the Gospel that reside in those who hear it. For the Gospel to be conveyed effectively in a given age, the preacher must be able to identify those aspects of it that the persons in his audience especially need. In brief, preaching the Gospel requires hard, intellectual work.

Since the Bible itself does not say how much preparation is enough, the church has the responsibility for determining the level of competence that it needs in its ministers, with attention given to the community it serves and the challenges of the surrounding culture. Depending on the needs of the day, individuals are trained variously through apprenticeships, uni-

versities, prep-schools, and seminaries. Practicums such as fieldwork, vicarages, and internships may be included. The length of this training can and does vary. There is nothing sacrosanct about four or six year programs, although there certainly may be good reasons for periods of training such as this. The inexhaustible richness of the Scriptures, combined with the always-changing challenges of ministry, suggest that the education and study of pastors cannot stop with graduation or a first call. These must be lifelong.

## **Examination/Certification**

The preparation or education of an individual has ordinarily culminated in the examination and certification that attest to his fitness to serve in the office to which he is called. That is to say, the preparation certifies that this man is able to convey the Gospel and exhibit the necessary discernment for diagnosing the spiritual condition of those who need the Gospel.

*Who evaluates the graduates or candidates?* While the church is responsible for evaluating those whom it places into the pastoral office, it has usually charged certain individuals or entities with the task of exercising this responsibility on its behalf. Most often the examination is carried out by those who have been entrusted with the training and formation of the candidates—and appropriately so. In Germany this was the theological faculty at the university. In the case of our Synod, the responsibility for the evaluation and certification of pastoral candidates has historically been placed into the hands of the seminaries. Through the seminaries candidates are declared qualified for a first call and formally commended to the church. The church may also give to others in its midst—such as interview committees (entrance to seminary), vicarage supervisors, and District Presidents—a role in the final evaluation and certification appropriate to the concerns of their particular office. Such a role should not replace the certification offered by those who are charged with the theological training of the candidates.

*Can there be an ongoing evaluation or certification process for those who already occupy the office?* We normally consider the examination complete when a man is certified for ministry at graduation and when he accepts his first call. In the sixteenth century, however, visitations and examinations were regularly carried out in order to assure the church that the preaching of the Gospel was being carried out faithfully. The laudable assumption behind such a practice is that the Gospel deserves our best efforts and our intensive study. The challenges facing the proclamation of the Gospel surely do not end with seminary training. New intellectual obstacles and cultural impediments arise continually. Such ongoing theological examina-

tion does not undermine the divine nature of the call, for certification and rostering are to be distinguished from a call and ordination. Rather, examination and certification assure the church that an individual is and continues to be qualified and competent for the office in which he serves, or for receiving another call. A person who has a call may not be as “apt to teach” as he once was (as determined by the church). Most Pastoral Information Forms (PIFs) today include some form of evaluation by the District President, Circuit Counselor, and the congregation. It is also possible, and perhaps even advisable, that a more formal examination could take place at checkpoints in a man’s ministry or through some form of continuing education so that the church may continue to receive the highest quality of care from its pastors.

*How does the examination occur?* In the sixteenth century an examination often took place over a period of several hours in front of a panel consisting of Luther, Bugenhagen, and Melancthon. Within the Missouri Synod the examination historically has involved a number of evaluations during a man’s seminary training, such as coursework, fieldwork, and vicarage—all of which culminated in his certification for ministry. Most often these evaluations have focused on the means through which God creates and preserves the church as the assembly of believers, namely, the Gospel and sacraments. Hence, they have been weighted, and rightly so, toward an emphasis on the marks of the church. Recognizing the human and institutional side of the church, the Synod now also may include the use of psychological profiles, personal interviews, and Self-Evaluation Tools (SETS) for the evaluation of a candidate. These instruments are not utilized for the purpose of assessing an individual’s personal faith, but for evaluating the “First Article” abilities and skills of the one who is to be placed into the service of the Gospel.<sup>61</sup> For pastors in the field the evaluation historically has taken place through the visitation and conversation of the District President, the congregations, and other pastors.

### ***Selection and the Extending of a Call***

A man may aspire to the pastoral office and prepare himself with a view to presenting himself as ready for service in that office, but he cannot place himself into the office. The office of preaching the Gospel belongs to Christ. One may not usurp what is only Christ’s to give. Rather, God identifies and selects an individual through the church for a particular location. This too has remained a *sine qua non* for the theology of the call in the history of our church. One can see this in chapters 1, 6, and 14 of Acts.

<sup>61</sup> See *Spiritual Gifts*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, September 1994, Part II, 16-45 (online at [www.lcms.org/ctcr/](http://www.lcms.org/ctcr/)).



*Through whom does God call?* The Congregation? Board of Regents? A Recognized Service Organization? A synod? The obvious answer is the church. But who or what is the church? In the Lutheran Confessions the church can refer to (1) the "holy Christian Church" (*una sancta ecclesia*) of the Apostles' Creed; (2) the territorial churches in Saxony (a number of congregations, consistories, superintendents, pastors); or (3) local congregations (teachers and hearers). But in practical terms the answer is more difficult. Is every person within the church involved? Individuals and groups within the church may be authorized to represent the church and act on its behalf. In Acts 1 the disciples acted and in Acts 14 Paul and Barnabas undertook the task. During the Reformation a consistory called or a superintendent appointed the pastor. Individual congregations played a minimal role, though pastors were never imposed on congregations without their consent. The congregation often possessed veto power over a proposed candidate.

In his day Walther insisted that the voting members of the congregation, as the representatives of that congregation, do the selecting and calling. But a congregation did not act in a free-lance manner and call an individual in isolation from the church at large. A pastor from a neighboring congregation served as a vacancy pastor and the District President supplied names for the calling congregation's consideration, names of men who were recognized as qualified by the church at large. In the case of graduates from a college or a seminary, the congregation called through a placement board consisting of the District Presidents and seminary representatives. In each of these cases congregations were not to disregard recommendations of the District President nor was the District President to ignore the concerns of the congregation.

The call process has grown more complex with each passing year. In recent years many new procedures for selecting and calling a candidate have arisen partly because of a lack of trust in those who have been designated with the responsibility of calling (congregations, District Presidents, and seminaries). And, some procedures have been developed to improve communication among the calling entities as a result of situations where a congregation's hopes and expectations have not been fulfilled or met on a previous call (as some might say, they have been "burned"). It must be acknowledged, however, that the problem of trust will not be solved by attempts to find the ideal or perfect procedure. Nor will the need for trust be eliminated by the adoption of different structures. In every case fallible human beings administer the process and mistakes will be made. But the integrity of the divine call must always be preserved and nothing done that will cause people to manipulate or pre-ordain the results of the process. In all calling situations congregations should be encouraged to remember that God's Holy Spirit is at work throughout the process.

*How should names be solicited or nominated?* In past practice, if a congregation desired to call a seminary graduate, it submitted a request to the seminary through the District President. The seminary and Council of Presidents together would then attempt to match a graduate with the needs of that congregation. If a congregation wanted to call a pastor from the field, it ordinarily invited its members to suggest names of potential candidates. Those were then shared with the District President who would take them into account and perhaps remove<sup>62</sup> or add names (based on availability of candidates and the needs of the congregation) to the recommended list. The congregation would then consider that list, modify it if so desired, and call an individual from it. These remain good and sound procedures.

In recent years variations in the procedures outlined above have become more common. Congregational members may ask family members for names. Pastors in neighboring congregations may propose names to members of the congregation or to the District President. In whatever way names are identified for compiling an initial list of candidates, it is important that the list still be submitted to the District President for his recommendations. Congregations ought not to circumvent the process to which all of us have committed ourselves, as we act together with the whole Synod and not in an isolated fashion.

May a pastor place his own name on a call list in a particular region? Again, it is appropriate for a pastor to be open to receiving a call from Christ to serve anywhere that Christ would make use of him. It is inappropriate, however, to “campaign,” “pull strings,” or “finagle” for a call to a particular position. As we have said earlier, one needs to consider carefully whether an “inner call” is being confused with personal ambition. This can lead to an excessive focus on the human factors of a call, and regrettably to a lower view—and even disparagement—of the call itself. More seriously, the focus may actually be shifted away from the office of the Gospel and the call turned into a mere stepping stone to a “better position.”

*How does a congregation decide whom to call?* The recent past has witnessed a steady decline in the number of congregations that select and call an individual based only on the information provided to them by the District President. If previously we have erred by obtaining insufficient information, today we risk erring on the side of seeking too much information. We must take care lest we assume that the Spirit works better either through more information, or through less information. Either approach

<sup>62</sup> A reason for removal might be, for example, that a man is under discipline or suspension and therefore is no longer eligible or available for a call. The removal of names was not to be done capriciously by the District President.

may fail sufficiently to recognize that the call comes from Christ. Selecting a man from a traditional (early twentieth-century) Missouri Synod call list with relatively *little information* could result, for example, in calling the individual whose moving costs are the least expensive or—to cite a more trivial case—avoiding someone with a non-German name. On the other hand, *more information* may encourage inordinate attention to peripheral matters, with less concern shown for more important issues such as the characteristics of the pastor (e.g., his aptness to convey God’s Word in its purity and power to the congregation).

Interviews have become increasingly common when congregations call from the seminary and from the field. The advantages and perhaps especially the disadvantages of this practice need to be seriously considered. To be sure, an interview may provide much helpful information to a congregation about an individual. At the same time, however, a two-hour interview may not be as accurate an assessment as the process undertaken over years by seminary faculties, District Presidents, and others. And in the case of seminary graduates, the interview process may even produce the unintended result of creating discouragement and disillusionment in those candidates who are not interviewed.

*What should one do upon receipt of a call?* When a pastor receives a call, he has an obligation to inform his congregation, the Circuit Counselor, and the District President of that fact and not keep it to himself. He also has an obligation to acknowledge receipt of the call to the calling congregation. Upon informing his congregation, a man should not treat the call as a bargaining chip in order to obtain, for instance, a better financial package. Furthermore, the congregation should be a part of the decision process and should be encouraged to pray for the pastor. When a man accepts a call to serve elsewhere he should seek a peaceful release from the congregation that he has been serving. The reason for such a practice is that the Christian congregation is not an aggregate of individuals, but is part of an organic union called the body of Christ. Christian congregations, therefore, are mutually responsible and accountable to one another.

*How long should one take to make a decision about a call?* No biblical mandate can be given in this area. It would seem wise, however, for an individual to take enough time prayerfully and patiently to think through the decision, but not so much time as to hinder the ministry of a congregation by undue delay. An unwritten rule of thumb has generally been that a period of three to four weeks is most appropriate. This seems reasonable and maintains the above two principles. Excessive delays in making a decision may be due more to an individual’s own indecisiveness than to an earnest effort to discern the Spirit’s guidance.

*Should a congregation call twice?* That is to say, should a congregation call an individual once again immediately after he has declined the call?

The danger exists that a congregation may think that by issuing a call a second or even a third time in succession to the same individual they are showing "how much the Spirit really wants" this individual, or conversely that the individual has simply failed to listen to the Spirit. It is possible, one might suppose, that a misunderstanding between the two parties could result in the need for a second call. As general rule, however, the congregation should take the individual's declination at face value and move forward with nominating and calling another individual. The call should not be treated as a contract negotiation or a bargaining session that takes place over a period of several calls (or offers). Such a way of proceeding only trivializes the divine character of the call.

### ***Ordination-Installation***

Ordination is the public recognition by the church that a particular man is qualified, has been elected by a congregation, and is recognized by the wider church as the pastor of a congregation and as an occupant of the pastoral office. Ordination follows the church's approval for service in the pastoral office through its structures for assessing aptitude, and acceptance of a first call to a specific field of service. The District President or his designated representative administers ordination with the assistance of other colleagues in the office. In this way the entire church affirms publicly that the man has been placed into the office of the ministry and assigned to the particular congregation.

## **The Specific Contents of the Call**

In light of the two dimensions of the church (as an institution, and as a spiritual reality) and thus the two dimensions of the call issued by the church, it is important to distinguish between those aspects of a call that are "by divine right" (*de jure divino*) and those that are "by human right" (*de jure humano*).

In as much as the church properly speaking is the assembly of believers, the call from Christ entails the responsibility and obligation to proclaim the Gospel in its purity and administer the sacraments in accordance with the Gospel. The pastor, therefore, feeds and guards the flock of God as an undershepherd of Christ. This is the essence of the call and is the one component that is common to the call of every man who serves in the pastoral office. The pastor possesses and carries out this task by the authority of Jesus Christ. Christ himself commissions him through the Holy Spirit and so when he speaks the words of Christ within the church he speaks for Christ (Luke 10:16).

In so far as the church possesses sociological characteristics as an institution within society, the congregation may include in its call specific tasks that can be assigned only by human authority. Such things would include a congregation's asking its pastor to carry out administrative tasks, leading it through a building project, and assisting it in charting out a course or "vision" for its future. These are important functions, but they play a supportive role for Word and sacrament ministry, just as the location and size of the building or the time of worship provide the setting and context for the proclamation of the Word. Since the pastor carries out such tasks by human authority, he cannot claim that one particular responsibility, practice, or method is uniquely "God's plan"—any more than he can claim that a particular meeting time or architectural style is ordained by God. Moreover, these particular tasks will vary from congregation to congregation. They are not applicable to all who serve as pastors.

Thus the call issued by a congregation includes elements that are by "divine right" and others that are "by human right."<sup>63</sup> But these elements must be distinguished. Christ has called the pastor through the congregation faithfully to administer the means of grace for the expansion and edification of the assembly of believers. The congregation may authorize the pastor to carry out leadership, administrative, and counseling responsibilities for the expansion and well being of the congregation. While they overlap, these two dimensions are not identical or coextensive.

## Is a Divine Call Open-Ended?

May calls be issued for a particular location or a specialized field of service for pre-determined lengths of service (e.g., 3-5 years)? Again we are reminded that neither the Scriptures nor the Confessions explicitly address the details of the call process, including also this issue. They exhibit less concern about the tenure of a particular call than they do about the pure proclamation of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. It may well be the case that the length of service, like location and salary, is also an issue that is entrusted to the church to administer "by human right" (*de jure humano*). Such determinations will vary from congregation to congregation and pastor to pastor, and may not be of equal importance. Not all serve at the same location. Not all serve with the same salary. So also, not all serve the same length of time. Yet, this does not mean that "anything goes" or that congregations may do whatever they want. Rather, the church in its wisdom has the responsibility of administering the call into the office of the ministry in a way that is consistent with its

<sup>63</sup> See the CTCR's 1981 report on *The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature*, esp. 13-19 (<http://www.lcms.org/ctcr/docs/ctcr-01.html>).

divinely instituted purpose: the proclamation of the Gospel. At the same time, the church will take into account the particular needs of the congregation within which the Gospel is proclaimed through this office.

### ***The Local Pastor (Pastor 'Locī')***

The normal practice within the history of Lutheranism has been to treat the call of the local pastor (*pastor loci*) as open-ended. Certainly this has also been the regular practice throughout the history of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. There have been good and solid reasons for regarding the calls of parish pastors as open-ended or of unspecified duration. In fact, the principles enunciated above (the institution of the office of the public ministry for proclaiming the Gospel, and the particular needs of the congregation in a given situation) come together in such a way that an open-ended call serves best, and this for three reasons.

First, “the divine call” of a pastor is usually spoken of in a way that emphasizes the divine institution and work of the pastoral office. Any discussion of pre-determined time limitations for a call has been tempered by the recognition that the man whom the congregation calls is God’s man in that particular location summoned to carry out God’s work. Consequently, neither the pastor nor the congregation are free to enter into a contractual arrangement that militates against the divine institution of the pastoral office and the scriptural teaching that the pastor is a gift given to the church (Eph 4:11; Acts 20:28). The divine origin and character of the call require that both pastor and congregation, as teacher and hearers, be faithful to God. Thus the practice has been to urge special caution against the creation of arbitrary time limits (apart from intrinsic need), since they encourage carnal motives in both pastors (moving on to better positions) and hearers (treating pastors as hirelings).

Second, as God’s man the pastor has the responsibility of proclaiming the Gospel in all its purity. The free and unhindered proclamation of the whole counsel of God has been a fundamental reason why the call of a local pastor has been considered permanent in a particular congregation. Where the possibility exists that a call will be terminated because the preaching of the Law is offensive, or where a “hire and fire” mentality is present, or where institutional regulations permit the congregation to dismiss pastors easily, it will be difficult for pastors to carry out the task of preaching the whole counsel of God. In such situations the pressure will increase for the pastor to become a “people-pleaser.” To speak of the call to the pastoral office as permanent can help forestall abuses that undermine the work of the Word and thus contributes to the well being of the church.

Third, parish pastors are responsible for administering all the means of grace to meet the full range of needs within a parish. This involves

everything from evangelism to edification, from baptisms to burials. To prepare Christians for the return of Christ, the parish pastor feeds and leads the entire congregation. Such ministry of Word and sacrament by definition, therefore, has to be open-ended because these needs and tasks are not completed until Christ returns. An open-ended call will help impress upon a pastor who accepts a call that he should never view the congregation as a field of temporary service while on his way to building a resumé qualifying him for more prestigious or better paying positions. A call to a congregation is not merely a rung on a ladder of advancement.

The above paragraphs assume a normal, settled situation in which the parish pastor is the local pastor (*pastor loci*) of a particular congregation. A call is not open-ended in the sense that it persists beyond the existence of a congregation. Situations can and do change, having an impact on the pastor and perhaps altering the specifics of his call—as when, for example, a congregation must enter into a dual parish arrangement. To take another example, a situation could exist where a congregation may want to plant a cross-cultural congregation. So they may decide to call a man to serve as a church planter for a specified length of time considered reasonable for assessing whether such a ministry is feasible or sustainable.

### *Pastors in Specialized Fields of Service*

The office of proclaiming of the Gospel and the needs of the congregation, as we have maintained, are often best served when the call is regarded as open-ended for those congregations in which the Word of God is being proclaimed and the sacraments are administered on a regular basis. The first of these criteria certainly applies to all who occupy the office of the public ministry. Thus the norm in the church is that an open-ended call be issued to everyone who serves in the office of the public ministry.

At the same time, the call to proclaim Law and Gospel does not take place in a vacuum. It occurs within specific contexts and situations. According to the second principle (recognition of the congregation's needs) we may conclude that, in addition to regular Word and sacrament ministry within congregations, the church's need for particular gifts or specialized skills at times is best met by something less than an open-ended call. We may proceed in this way (and have already done so) as long as we do not undermine the divine institution of the office or hinder in any way the proclamation of the whole counsel of God. Such has been the case within The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod for much of its history with regard to theological professors, District and synodical officials, military chaplains, campus pastors, missionaries, church planters, etc. Several examples can illustrate such situations.

When choosing its theological professors, the church must have men



who have acquired the necessary academic and theological qualifications and who have shown themselves to be capable teachers. It has been necessary, therefore, to call professors for a set period of time with a view to evaluating them on the basis of their academic abilities (obtaining advanced degrees), scholarship in the service of the church (publishing), and aptitude to teach. This is not an evaluation of their theological orthodoxy or fitness for the office of the public ministry, but of their skills and abilities for a specialized task. Following such evaluation the church may grant tenure or a rolling contract to these individuals as a way of expressing its confidence in their scholarship and teaching aptitude. So, the particular needs of the church to have men with the academic credentials and specialized skills of scholarship and teaching lead it to issue calls for a determined period of time.

In the case of missionaries the Missouri Synod has found it advantageous to call a man to serve in a particular field for a prescribed period of time, followed by a brief return to the United States before resuming service overseas. In a number of instances this agreed pattern helps to balance out the investment of time and money that the church has invested in preparing the missionary for such service. The time duration for the call, then, becomes a matter of good stewardship. In the case of church planters a District may have enough money to finance a particular mission or church planting for a limited period. After this period, it is agreed, the man's call will either continue in that congregation because it is now capable of supporting a pastor, or he will be reassigned or called to another location. And so, as the church experiments with new and different strategies with limited resources available, it may issue a call (by mutual agreement) for a limited period of time.

Another form of specialized ministry that may involve calls of limited tenure (also by mutual agreement) is that of Intentional Interim Pastors. In recent years congregations experiencing a pastoral vacancy after a period of conflict, controversy, or turmoil have found it helpful, before they call a new permanent pastor, to take some time to work through issues troubling them with the assistance of a specially trained pastor. There are other instances when an interim pastor may be of benefit to a congregation (for example, a vacancy arising when a pastor leaves the congregation after a particularly long term of service, or the death of a pastor in office). In cases like this the congregation may be in need of reflection, healing, or reorganization before calling its new pastor. The interim is normally for a specific period of time mutually determined by the congregation and the interim pastor. Most certainly, it is not good for the congregation to go without Word and sacrament ministry. Congregations have an obligation to fill the office that exists within their midst. At the same time, for a congregation to call another permanent pastor before these special concerns are addressed may contribute to ongoing difficulties or may result in new congregational conflict as a result



of unresolved issues. While vacancy pastors have always been a part of the church's life, today it may be beneficial to enlist the services of an interim pastor who has acquired specialized skills for guiding the congregation through a transitional period while serving them with Word and sacrament. The congregation has the right to determine whether or not it wants an interim pastor. An interim ministry must never be imposed.

In each of the above-mentioned cases the church engages in careful deliberation so that any call issued for a limited period of time may not dishonor the divine institution of the office of the public ministry nor restrict the pastor's freedom to proclaim the whole counsel of God in keeping with his subscription to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.<sup>64</sup>

### *May Calls Be Conditional?*

Calls should never be issued under certain prescribed conditions. For example, a call should not be extended to a pastor contingent on his achieving particular objectives such as numerical growth, the successful completion of a capital building project, the utilization of a particular program, or the attainment of certain budgetary goals. Such conditions directly infringe upon the divine character of the call issued by the church, and detract from the central task of the office.

State regulations requiring a review of a potential minister's integrity in the area of sexual ethics can be acceptable to the church, since such a review in effect seeks to establish that a candidate is "above reproach." At issue, however, is when this review takes place. In response to a request concerning a Minnesota statute, the CTCR stated in a 1998 opinion that

unconditional calls have always been the rule in the Synod. In fact, in the opinion of the CTCR, conditional calls are inconsistent with Lutheran theology because they appear to contradict the nature of the divine call as unconditionally given by God through a Christian congregation.

<sup>64</sup> George Nielsen provides evidence that termed calls among confessional Lutherans were not unknown in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He cites the case of Pastor John Kilian, who was the leader of Wendish Lutherans who came to Texas in 1854. Nielsen writes: "Among the Wends who migrated in 1854 Kilian was without question the spiritual leader. He was consulted on many other matters as well, but the temporal leadership of the Wendish community came from laymen. The first indication of this lay leadership was in the 1854 call to Kilian. Kilian did not gather the members of the Weigersdorf and Klitten congregation to lead them to Texas; laymen from scattered villages in Saxony and Prussia first formed an association and then asked Kilian to be their pastor. The laymen assumed the responsibility of gathering the migrants and of financing the venture. The call they sent Kilian was for one year only, an indication that the laymen could release themselves of the expenses of a pastor if they did not succeed financially." *In Search of a Home ... Nineteenth Century Wendish Immigration*, Texas A. & M. University Press, 1989, 70.

It is the understanding of the CTCR that, were a congregation to extend a call to a pastor subject to a satisfactory Minnesota Statute 148a background check, this would constitute a conditional call. It is our strong opinion that congregations should not issue conditional calls. Such practice would set a dangerous precedent and would open the door to misunderstanding, mischief and possible legal action. It is our recommendation, therefore, that as congregations comply with Statute 148a they be encouraged to exhibit patience and await the response called for in this statute before issuing a call.<sup>65</sup>

In this opinion the CTCR encourages compliance but cautions that the background check should occur prior to, not after, the issuance of a call.

### *May a Call be Terminated?*

The Holy Spirit calls a man into the office of the public ministry through the instrumentality of the church. He entrusts to the church the responsibility of determining how best to administer the call for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel in all its purity and clarity. In the faithful exercise of its stewardship of the mysteries of God in various ages and cultures, the church has adopted procedures suitable for its time and place. These procedures determine not only how a man enters the full-time, public ministry of the Word, but also how he leaves the office. How and on what basis removal takes place is a serious and sensitive matter. As we have seen earlier, C. F. W. Walther affirmed that a congregation has a right to remove a pastor, but this dare not be done presumptuously or arbitrarily. A pastor should be removed only after cause has been sufficiently established by lawful procedure, after he has refused to accept instruction, etc. Proper causes simply make it clear that God has already deposed the man as a hireling or “wolf.”

### *Removal from Office*

The church has traditionally laid down two grounds for deposing pastors and other servants of the Word: persistent teaching of false doctrine, and leading a scandalous and offensive life. Persistent teaching of false doctrine undermines the foundation of the faith. A scandalous life leads people to blaspheme God’s name. These causes not only provide the grounds for removing a man from service in the congregation, but they

<sup>65</sup> 1998 Convention Workbook, 51.

also render him ineligible for receiving any subsequent call to another congregation or place of service. He is no longer in the office of the public ministry. These reasons presume that the pastor has undermined the ministry of the Word, and in biblical terms is no longer “apt to teach” and “above reproach.”

A third reason has often been cited within the Lutheran tradition, namely, the inability or refusal to perform the duties of the office. Inability has reference to physical disabilities or diminished mental capacities that involuntarily prevent one from carrying out the responsibilities of the office. The refusal to carry out the duties of the office, in the words of Walther, is deliberate unfaithfulness in the office. This cause for removal may include behavior such as laziness, carelessness in carrying out official acts, drunkenness, obstinacy, and laxity about visiting the sick.

Walther adds two other causes, which may be regarded either as further elaborations of the two above-mentioned causes, or as separate reasons. The first of these is that a pastor may be guilty of overstepping the authority of the Word and becoming “domineering” in the office (as when he imposes his will upon a congregation in matters where the congregation has the proper authority). Finally, removal might become necessary in a situation where the pastor is not “a totally wicked person,” but may, for example, have the problem of an inadequately—or perhaps even overly—sensitive conscience.

As we have already noted, the removal of a man from the office of the public ministry is a very serious matter and should not be carried out capriciously or arbitrarily. It is of utmost importance that the church act corporately—hearers and teachers, laity and clergy together. Thus too, a congregation needs to involve the Circuit Counselor and District President. Working cooperatively, they will follow due process and so seek the best possible result for all parties involved. The congregation should also be prepared to heed the advice of the District President regarding biblical reasons for removing a man, and this in spite of a pastor’s popularity in the congregation. When a man has been removed from the office for reasons that come under the third cause listed above, it is possible that following a period of repentance, counsel, and rehabilitation, he could once again become eligible for a call.

## *Relocation*

We in the Lutheran tradition hold that God concludes a person’s period of service at a particular location through a call from another congregation (just as Paul was summoned from one location to another). Ordinarily this occurs smoothly and without incident, though there have been times in the past when problems that a pastor has encountered at one con-

gregation follow him to the next congregation. In some cases these difficulties may be due to a lack of necessary gifts or skills for a particular task or context. This does not necessarily disqualify him from serving in the office of the ministry. Minor failings or weaknesses often need to be tolerated. In such situations, however, it is extremely important that District Presidents openly communicate with their fellow District Presidents and with the congregations. Such a way of proceeding will greatly benefit congregations and help to identify a field of service where the man's particular gifts may be best utilized.

There are also instances when a man needs a break from the work of ministry due to extreme fatigue, lack of necessary skills, or personal problems. Ideally, he may be given a leave of absence (sabbatical) for personal renewal, possible counseling, and rehabilitation. In more extreme situations when a pastor refuses to accept a need recognized by all, he may have to be relieved of certain duties or even relieved of his call altogether. In such instances, he would be placed on candidate status (hopefully without a stigma attached to it). The church should do everything possible to provide some type of a "safety net" as he prepares to resume the duties of his office and receives another call. Every effort should be made to assist the man in receiving another call suitable to his talents and gifts.

### *Performance Evaluations*

Christ entrusts the office of the ministry to the church for its administration. The church therefore has a responsibility to care for the office, paying close attention not only to candidates called into the office, but also to the occupants and their activities. Accordingly, the church ought to review and evaluate what takes place within the office so that a man is in fact faithfully administering Christ's Word. But once again, we must be careful about uncritically adopting business models for the church.

We must be continually mindful of the two dimensions of the office. On the one hand, the church must be fed with the pure Word of God. Congregations call a pastor to feed them with the Gospel. This entails a responsibility to evaluate the pastor in light of scriptural models (remembering, of course, that the greatest of God's servants were frequently in tension with the majority view and current theological fashion). For this reason, Walther wanted people to know *The Book of Concord* so that they could test their preachers. The church certifies a man on the basis of doctrine when he enters the office, but that obligation does not cease once he enters it. A congregation should seek continuing theological education for its pastor. A pastor's refusal or persistent failure to devote himself to growth in the Word of God not only says something about the importance he places on doctrine, but it could also constitute grounds for removing him from a con-

gregation—and perhaps even from the office of the ministry itself. Indeed, it is incumbent upon a congregation (and the church at large) to evaluate its pastor regarding his doctrine, his life, and his faithfulness in carrying out the God-given tasks of the office.

On the other hand, we also recognize that the church asks a pastor to carry out a number of “First Article” tasks that support the preaching of the Gospel (e.g., administrative tasks, stewardship programs, etc.). These, too, may be subject to evaluation. But we need to keep the following considerations in mind. It is possible that a man is faithfully preaching the Gospel, administering the sacraments, and extending pastoral care to the members of his congregation. However, he may lack specific gifts (e.g., administrative skills, an ability to motivate young people to participate in a youth group, or the aptitude willingly to receive counsel from the congregation). The lack of such skills does not constitute a basis for removing a man either from the ministry or from a congregation, since they do not constitute the essential tasks of the office. Nevertheless, when gifts or skills needed for a particular location or task are lacking, the congregation and pastor by mutual agreement may decide that it would be best for the pastor to labor in another field more suited to his special gifts (such as the pastor of a small congregation, or an associate, rather than an administrative pastorate).

Great caution should be exercised lest a pastor’s faithfulness or effectiveness be evaluated primarily on the basis of factors such as balancing the budget or increasing the membership of the church by a set percentage every year. Such a way of proceeding would represent a significant and unbiblical shift away from the divinely appointed use of the means of grace to human factors important for increasing the size of an institutional organization. At the same time, a pastor should not hide behind or appeal to his call as an excuse for being lazy or negligent in his responsibilities. In this case the third reason given for removing a man from the office may be applicable.

### *Resignation and Retirement*

In days past it was customary to think that God brought a man’s service in the office of the public ministry to an end by calling him home, declaring of him “well done, thou good and faithful servant.” Certainly the apostles themselves served until death, caused by martyrdom or by natural causes. Until the twentieth century life expectancy for men did not extend much past sixty years of age. Retirement plans did not exist. It was therefore necessary also that in order for pastors to have some means of livelihood, they would have to serve in office until their dying day (as was the case for many other occupations). But this is often no longer the case.

Contemporary society raises questions that did not exist for much of the church's history.

Can a person retire or resign from the ministry? Some would argue that since only God can conclude a ministry—and this only through another call or through death—retirement or resignation in and of itself involves a rejection of God's call and will. However, when Christ instituted the office of the ministry he committed the administration of that office to the church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In former years many served in the ministry until the day of their death, but there is no scriptural mandate in this regard.

What about voluntary retirement? Resigning or retiring should certainly not be done in an arbitrary fashion. A pastor may reach the conclusion that he has grown physically and mentally less able to serve. In such cases it would be appropriate and prudent for him to consider whether or not the church continues to benefit under his shepherding as it once did. Retirement does not mean that a man cannot find limited or part-time ways of serving. In most instances such a person continues to be recognized as a pastor and may choose to assist congregations on a part-time basis.

What should be said about mandatory retirement? Taking into account societal changes, the church may adopt a policy asking men to retire at a certain age. That age may continue to rise as it has this past century. As the church adopts a general retirement policy, it must also keep in mind that many older pastors remain active, alert, and capable well past traditional retirement age.

## CONCLUSION

The Word of God is a precious gift that the Lord has given to his people. Indeed, the Word is the instrument or channel through which God forgives and recreates his people. The formal responsibility and high privilege of administering the Word publicly in behalf of the whole congregation has brought excitement and delight to those who serve within the office of the public ministry. Pastors and all those whom they are called by God to serve will strive diligently to honor him and the ministry entrusted to them by properly exercising the call into this holy office.





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## **Minority Opinions**

Two Minority Opinions prepared by three members of the 16-member Commission on Theology and Church Relations are available. You may read these Minority Opinions by clicking on [Minority Opinion of Paul Nus](#) or [Minority Opinion of Kurt Marquart and Walter Lehenbauer](#).