

# Speaking the Word as Ecclesiastical Supervisor

## Introduction

Before the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod existed, the commitment to purity of doctrine and practice existed in the mind of the chief architect of the Synod, C.F.W. Walther. As Walther and Pastor Ernst conversed by letter in 1845, Walther listed his wishes for the new Synod they were discussing. “My wishes concerning this affair go essentially like this...3. The chief work of the Synod should be to establish maintenance, promotion and supervision of the unity and purity of Lutheran doctrine.”<sup>1</sup> It should not be surprising then, that when the Constitution of the Synod was written the primary responsibility of this supervision was charged to the President of the Synod, (allgemeine Prases). The 1854 constitution of the Synod states it in this way:

He has the supervision over the doctrine, practice, and the respective administration of all synodical officers...to see to it that those who are named in the preceding paragraph conduct themselves in doctrine, practice, and administration of office in accordance with the constitution of Synod.<sup>2</sup>

By 1854 the Synod had grown to the point that it was deemed necessary to divide it into administrative units called districts. These districts were required to have presidents who were given supervisory authority within their respective districts. The 1854 constitution described their duties in this way, “The District requires of its President a report of the results of his visitations in the previous year, according to instructions, in order to watch over the doctrine, life, and work of pastors and teachers.”<sup>3</sup>

The constitution of the Synod has been amended again and again but the provision for doctrinal supervision has survived. The current constitution contains this description of the duties of the office of the district president. “The district presidents shall, moreover, especially exercise supervision over the doctrine, life, and administration of office of the ordained and commissioned ministers of their district and acquaint themselves with the religious conditions of the congregations of their district.”<sup>4</sup>

The question addressed in this paper is, “How do ecclesiastical supervisors speak the Word of God to those over whom they have been given charge?” Given the consistent interest of the Synod in doctrinal supervision, this is an intriguing inquiry, especially in these days when the world demands that we question all authority. Confusion exists among members of the Synod over the office of district president; specifically, by what authority does he speak the Word God and does he or does he not hold the office of the public ministry?

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<sup>1</sup> Briefe. Walther, C.F.W, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo. 1915 . Vol. I p. 15 Author’s translation of text as found in Government in Missouri. Munding, Carl. Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo. 1947. p. 173.

<sup>2</sup> Moving Frontiers. Meyer, Carl. Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo. 1964. p. 159.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 153.

<sup>4</sup> 2007 LCMS Constitution. Article XII.7. p. 17.

## **I. The LCMS and the office of district president.**

Whereas the duties of the district presidents in the LCMS are fairly clearly delineated, the nature of the office is not. Before we can approach the question that drives this paper we must answer some questions that will require judgments to be made with regard to this nature.

### **A. Do district presidents hold the office of the public ministry?**

Are district presidents in the office of the public ministry? The answer to this question will do much to determine how the office holder might speak the Word of God to those under his care. In its report of September 1981 entitled, The Ministry- Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) sought to settle the issue.

The question is also asked: Is it possible to exercise the office of shepherd and overseer in the church only in a typical parish situation? In the case of “administrative officials,” for instance, is the church calling as an “elder of the church” a man qualified to exercise oversight when it calls him to be a District president?...The answer may be yes or no. It depends on the call. If a man is asked merely to perform a necessary but only secular function for the church but is not called to public accountability as an overseer in the church, he is not in the office of the public ministry. However, District presidents who are charged with the oversight of the overseers of the flock...can be properly said to be serving in the office of the public ministry of the church.<sup>5</sup>

The argument in this paragraph is clear. Because the district president carries out a part of the duties of a Pastor (that is oversight) the president is to be considered as serving in the office of the public ministry.

This contention is based on two premises: 1) The trans-parochial church, (e.g. synod), can issue calls into the office. 2) The Confessions of the Lutheran Church tacitly accept the concept that individuals can specialize in certain responsibilities of the office of the public ministry.

The concept of the trans-parochial church is beyond the scope of this paper, but there is considerable support for the second premise. The Confessions freely wield the language of preacher, pastor, presbyter, priest and bishop. The Treatise speaks of various gifts within the office of the ministry, based on the authority of the Word.

Besides, the ministry of the New Testament is not bound to places and persons, as the Levitical priesthood is, but is spread abroad through the whole world and exists wherever God gives his gifts, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers. Nor is this ministry valid because of any individual’s authority but because of the Word given by Christ.<sup>6</sup>

Several authors who follow this train of thought may help make the argument clearer. Kurt Marquardt focuses on the office of theological professor. They are not in an auxiliary

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<sup>5</sup>Commission on Theology and Church Relations. The Ministry- Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature. September, 1981. p. 20-21.

<sup>6</sup>Tappert, Theodore G.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 2000, c1959, S. 324

office, but specialize in a particular function of the office. "It is interesting to note in this connection, that the members of the theological faculty in Wittenberg in Luther's time were considered to be 'ministers of the Gospel...'"<sup>7</sup>

David Webber writes,

The specific 'offices' of the ministry are vocationally divisible, and according to the needs and circumstances of the church they can be vocationally apportioned to various men in various ways, individually or in select combinations. As the Treatise declares, the ministry of the New Testament "exists wherever God gives his gifts, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers."<sup>8</sup>

Herman Sasse adds that the offices that specialize in a particular function must serve the congregational Pastor since it is the most comprehensive fulfillment of the office of the ministry.

Examples of this in the history of the church are the office of an episcopate, or superintendency, or any other offices, whatever they may be called. But all these offices have their right of existence only insofar as they serve the one great office of the preaching of the Gospel and the administering of the sacraments. A bishop may be entrusted with the task of seeing to the running of a great diocese. But the meaning of such an assignment can only consist in this, that he thereby gives room and support to the Church's ministry. His actual office is the office of pastor, also when he is a pastor for the pastors. By human arrangement he may have the work of superintendency. By divine mandate he has solely the office of preaching the forgiveness and justification of sinners for Christ's sake.<sup>9</sup>

While the foregoing works clearly place the office of ecclesiastical supervisor in the office of the public ministry the bylaws of the LCMS are not so clear. Apart from the requirement that he be on the roster of the LCMS as an ordained minister (Bylaw 4.3.1) the connection to the office of the public ministry is not made. Nearly every reference to the holder of this office is made in terms of the title district president. Once, in Bylaw 4.4.4.d, he is referred to as a "brotherly advisor." The duties are all couched in terms of ecclesiastical supervision. Reading the Constitution and Bylaws of the Synod would not give the impression that this office is one of the public ministry.

The rite of installation for the district president is another story. Some, but not all of the texts that are used for the installation of a Pastor are read. However, the president is asked about his commitment to the Scriptures and Confessions and a ceremonial presentation of the Scriptures and Confessions (as well as the Handbook of the Synod) is made. This ceremony connects the office of the presidency with the Word, and may lead those present to conclude that the president does hold the office of the public ministry.

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<sup>7</sup> Marquart, Kurt, The Church And Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance. Confessional Dogmatics 9, (International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, Fort Wayne, IN. 1990. p. 142.

<sup>8</sup> Webber, David, "An Examination of Apology XXVII, 22 in Its Confessional Context," Logia, 10, No. 3. 2001. p. 44.

<sup>9</sup> Sasse, Hermann. We Confess Anthology, We Confess the Church. Concordia Publishing House. St. Louis, MO. 1999. p. 71.

Unfortunately, another inconsistency is present in the fact that no call documents are issued the president. If, as the CTCR contends, the president holds the office of the public ministry, and serves under a call from the larger Church, it would be consistent for him to receive some sort of document recognizing that office. Furthermore:

Some offices in the church cannot be defined with absolute clarity merely by referring to their titles. The call itself should demonstrate why it is a 'call' and not merely an office of employment as a lay worker in the church.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of the District President this advice of the CTCR has been ignored.

A further complication exists in the election of the district president, or more precisely, in the incumbent's loss of an election. How are we to understand his removal from office by the loss of an election? Is the call being rescinded? Is he being removed because of an inability to perform the duties of the office? Or should the call be understood as one of serving until God removes him through the vote of the delegates. This uncertainty makes it difficult to think of the office as being a called position.

The vacillation between two points is not healthy for those who hold the office of district president. It is not healthy for those whom he is charged to serve. The confusion this uncertainty creates is reason enough for this paper. This conflicting pattern continues in the answers we will find to the next question.

#### **B. Do District Presidents use the Word of God to accomplish their duties?**

Is the primary duty of the district president connected to the Word of God? There is little doubt that one of the duties of the district president is ecclesiastical supervision. Again, the Bylaws are clear.

Each district president, in accordance with the Constitution of the Synod, shall supervise the doctrine, the life, and the official administration on the part of the ordained or commissioned ministers who are members through his district or are subject to his ecclesiastical supervision...<sup>11</sup>

This means that the president is charged with judging the purity of the doctrine that is taught by ordained and commissioned ministers of the Synod.

What is not clear in this case is the means by which the president is to make that judgment. Perhaps the defenders of the Bylaws would argue that we should assume the means is Word of God. However, assumptions always provide room for confusion. How much latitude does the president have to insert his own bias? By not clearly stating an essential connection to the Word of God as the instrument of his office the Synod has left room for some harmful interpretations.

One of those is that the office of the district presidency is solely one of the law. The Reverend Doctor George Wollenburg was the major proponent of this position and his writings have had widespread influence in the Synod. After listing duties of the district presidents, including exercising supervision over doctrine, he writes in a 1985 Concordia Theological Quarterly article:

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 31

<sup>11</sup> 2007 LCMS Handbook Bylaw 4.4.5. p. 190.

Not one of these duties is in any way the duty of the pastoral office in the church. The pastoral office is identified with the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. The duties prescribed for the District president in the constitution are a ministry of the law, not of the Gospel. Perception of the office of district president as a pastoral office confuses law and gospel in the church and destroys both the purpose of the office of district president and the pastoral office in the congregations. The hierarchy in the church serves only the purpose of order; therefore, this ministry is not properly speaking a ministry of the Gospel, but a ministry of law.<sup>12</sup>

The influence of this opinion should not be underestimated. Many district presidents who heard President Wollenburg speak have assumed this position. The cliché, “The office of the district presidency is an office of the law,” has worked its way into common parlance in the Synod. Since many have assumed it is true the saying has produced widespread ramifications on the manner in which the office of district presidency has been carried out.

The argument here offered by President Wollenburg (my sainted mentor and predecessor in the office) is frail on two counts. First, the duty of supervision over doctrine is certainly a duty of the Pastoral office in the Church, in fact, a primary duty. This is the very argument that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations used to reach its conclusion that the office of district presidency is a part of the pastoral office. It is unclear whether President Wollenburg, writing four years later, was presenting a direct challenge to the CTCR. It would appear that President Wollenburg’s opinion had the greater influence. Nonetheless, he seems to have overlooked doctrinal supervision as a duty of the pastoral office.

The second frailty in President Wollenburg’s argument cuts even deeper, to the very nature of the Church. He states that the office of presidency, or of hierarchy in general, exists only for the purpose of order, and is therefore a ministry of the law. This presents a fundamental confusion over how order is maintained in what is known, in Lutheran circles, as the two kingdoms. It is true that in the kingdom of the left hand, that is, the kingdom of the sword, or the kingdom of this world, that order is maintained solely by the Law. God gives governments the sword of the law to keep order for the sake of the Gospel. The kingdom of the left hand does not proclaim the Gospel. God uses this kingdom to maintain outward order so that the Gospel can be proclaimed and heard.

However, the kingdom of the right hand, the kingdom of the Word, the kingdom of the Church, is of a fundamentally different nature. Yes, the Law still functions in the right hand kingdom to curb outward manifestations of sin. But that is not the final goal. The outward control of sin is not the order of the Church. The death of sin, and the resurrection to life is order in the Church. The end, the teleos of order within the Church, is produced only by the Gospel. If the Church seeks to maintain order solely by the law there could be no absolution. Absolution, forgiveness, and life is the order of the Church. The Law cannot produce this. Only the Gospel can produce the ultimate order that God desires in the Church, and for every man.

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<sup>12</sup> Wollenburg, George. “An Assessment of LCMS Polity and Practice on the Basis of the Treatise”. Concordia Theological Quarterly. April-July 1985. p. 105.

On a very practical level the adoption of President Wollenburg's position completely severs the district presidency from the Word of God. For, if the district president speaks only the law he is not speaking the Word of God. The Word of God consists of Law and Gospel. He will ultimately have no use for the Word. He will descend to the position of the kingdom of the left hand, and find authority only in man-made laws, in this case, the Handbook of the Synod.

Again, if the district presidency is only an office of the law he can correct, admonish, discipline, and suspend those who teach or behave incongruently with the teachings of the Scripture, but he has no right to absolve. Such a condition cannot produce order in the Church. It can produce fear and resentment. It can produce confusion in the Synod by not allowing the district presidency the means of bringing about order, that is, the Law and the Gospel of the Word of God.

Perhaps this is what the Bylaws of the Synod are implying when they define ecclesiastical supervision in this way:

Ecclesiastical supervision: The responsibility, primarily of the President of the Synod and district presidents, to supervise on behalf of the Synod the doctrine, life, and administration of its members, officers, and agencies. Such supervision, subject to the provision of the Synod's Constitution, Bylaws, and resolutions, includes visitation, evangelical encouragement and support, care, protection, counsel, advice, admonition, and, when necessary, appropriate disciplinary measures to assure that the Constitution, Bylaws, and resolutions of the Synod are followed and implemented.<sup>13</sup>

The Synod may benefit by elucidating this implication. What would evangelical encouragement, support and care mean if not the correct application of the Gospel at the proper moment? This would be consistent with the position of the CTCR that the district presidency maintains the part of the duties of the public ministry dealing with supervision of doctrine. Such an office must have access to the full use of the Word of God.

### **C. What's in a name?**

Further confusion continues in the Synod regarding the name which this office carries. On the one hand the CTCR seems to say that district presidents are Pastors. "We have previously mentioned that a District president remains in the pastoral ministry by virtue of his being called to oversee the pastors and churches..."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand the Commission emphasizes that the presidents, by virtue of the fact that they have only part of the responsibilities of the pastoral office are a supporting office. "In considering the office of the public ministry one must consider the relationship between 'parish pastors' and 'non parish pastors.'" They note that most are parish pastors, however, "...other kinds of pastors serve to provide a support system for the work of the parish pastor and his congregation."<sup>15</sup>

Allowing district presidents to carry the title Pastor creates more confusion. If they are supportive of Pastors and focus on specific functions of the office allowing them to carry the title Pastor opens the door for misunderstanding. Walther's concept of auxiliary offices might

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<sup>13</sup> 2007 LCMS Handbook Bylaw 1.2.1.g p. 22. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>14</sup> Commission on Theology and Church Relations. The Ministry- Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature. September, 1981. p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

be cited here for purposes of clarification. Other offices, created by the Church, that are responsible for portions of the duties of the pastoral office, (e.g. Teacher, DCE, Deaconess etc.), are considered to be auxiliary offices and serve the pastoral office. Using the same reasoning process it would be consistent to apply this rule to the office of the district president. Those offices that focus on specific functions in support of the congregational pastor should not carry the name pastor.

Additional confusion is fostered in the Synod by the use of the term “president.” This title has a long history of use in the development of the Synod. Even before the Synod existed those who were given supervisory capacity were referred to by the title.<sup>16</sup> There may be a sinister reason a more biblical title was not chosen. Munding, when writing about the development of the Synod, does not refer specifically to the use of the title “president” but he does refer to a persistent, pervading fear of “priest-rule” in the developing Synod.<sup>17</sup> As a result of the Saxon’s experience with Bishop Stephan it is unlikely that the use of the term “bishop,” the biblical equivalent of supervision, would garner much support.

The word president, however does not do justice to the office, not only because it is not a biblical term, but also because it does not accurately describe the duties of the office. The word means, “to preside over” or “to exercise authority over.” Since there is no biblical context by which to connect this term to the Word of God it retains a worldly sense of “being the boss.” It cannot shed the association it has with its use for the President of the United States of America. (I have had my Pastors introduce me with, “He is my boss.”) This is a deadly misunderstanding.

The title “bishop,” (or perhaps its Latin equivalent, “supervisor”), does describe the primary function of the district presidency, doctrinal supervision. Because of its biblical context it also connects the office with the Word of God. It might be healthy for the Synod to investigate a new title for the office of the district president. The drawback with the use of “Bishop” is the connection with Roman Catholic tendency to elevate the Bishop as more important or higher than the Pastor. If such inclinations cannot be avoided the title would not be helpful.

#### **D. Conclusions**

Since the primary duty of a Synod is ecclesiastical supervision it would be healthy for The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to clarify the nature of the office most engaged in this duty. It may not be possible to clarify the inconsistencies that have been highlighted thus far, but it is worth our discussion. One of two positions should be held consistently. The one position would be that district presidents do not hold a part of the office of the public ministry, do not have a call, and serve wholly a left hand kingdom office of the law.

The other position would be that district presidents, declared by the Church to be fit for office through their ordination, focus on a specific function of the office of the public ministry, that is, the duty of doctrinal supervision. Therefore they can be said to be in the office of the ministry in an assisting role. However, since they are not responsible for a congregation they should not be called Pastors.

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<sup>16</sup> Meyer, Carl. p. 112.

<sup>17</sup> Munding, Carl. Government in Missouri. Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo. 1947. p. 172.

The office of the District Presidency is not above the office of Pastor. It is supportive of the office. Neither the office holder nor the Pastor should think of the district president as the boss. The president should be thought of as someone given to assist the Pastor and the congregation through doctrinal supervision. Here considerable teaching will be required so that all concerned recognize the application of Matthew 20:25-28.

But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."<sup>18</sup>

Ecclesiastical supervision cannot be carried out in a healthy, productive manner in the absence of this God-given attitude.

The district president carries out this supervision solely by the power of the Word. Although Synodical bylaws will necessarily be involved, the Word of God is the authority by which the district president speaks. The only way this can be done is if the entire Word of God is at his disposal. In order for this to happen the Synod would have to make it clear that the office is not one solely of the law. Without this full Word no order can be maintained in the Church. With these understandings in place we can take a closer look at the duty of ecclesiastical supervision.

## **II. District presidents are required to carry out the duty of ecclesiastical supervision.**

Ecclesiastical supervision is a title that was chosen because it covers more than doctrinal supervision. We have read the Bylaws which charge district presidents with supervision of doctrine, life, and administration of members of the Synod. It is time to investigate the nature of ecclesiastical supervision.

### **A. Ecclesiastical supervision is a responsibility of the Church.**

We will not benefit by seeking to settle the question of who has priority in judging doctrine. With whom does ecclesiastical supervision begin is not a helpful question. The report of the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synodical Structure and Governance stated that it begins with the office of Synodical President.<sup>19</sup> This is clearly incorrect. It cannot begin with an office that does not appear in the Scripture. But seeking to give priority to the Church or to the office of the public ministry, the two scriptural contenders in this matter, would prove unproductive. For the purposes of this paper it is unnecessary. Both have a responsibility.

The office of the public ministry is certainly charged with doctrinal supervision by the teaching of the Word of God. Paul tells Timothy, "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."<sup>20</sup> He instructs Titus, "But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Mt 20:25-28

<sup>19</sup> Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synodical Structure and Governance. Congregation, Synod, Church. The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. 2007. p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. 2 Ti 4:2

<sup>21</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Tit 2:1

The Church is also responsible for judging doctrine. Paul teaches the Church at Galatia, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.”<sup>22</sup> Paul’s argument in this section of his letter presupposes the responsibility of the Church to make a judgment over what they are being taught.

Walther took great pains to defend the Church’s right to judge doctrine.

“However, according to God’s Word, the right to judge doctrine has not been taken away from the laymen by the establishment of the ministry. On the contrary, this is their most sacred duty, as in the first place all those passages of Holy Scripture that command laymen to judge doctrine incontestably declare.”<sup>23</sup>

He then lists: I Cor. 10:15-16, I John 4:1, II John 10-11, and I Thess. 5:21. Walther also quotes Luther.

“When Christ says: ‘My sheep hear my voice’ (John 10:27); ‘they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him.’ (v. 5), does He not appoint the sheep as judges and give the hearers the right to judge, prove, and condemn, and this with absolute authority?”<sup>24</sup>

Pastor and people exist together as God’s creation, both with a responsibility to judge doctrine.

From time to time, as the Church deems it beneficial to create extra-congregational structures such as a Synod, congregations may ask for help in carrying out this responsibility. This is how the Synodical role of ecclesiastical supervision should be understood.

Wollenburg reminds us that Luther recognized this procedure by instituting visitation. “The practice of visitation, which began in Saxony in 1528, indicates that Luther regarded the larger body of believers as having some responsibility also for the local churches.”<sup>25</sup> In the same article he contends that the president represents not only the congregations who elected him when he officiates at ordinations, but also the entire Synod. “The president acts as representative of the churches in the confessional fellowship in such authorization, and publicly attests the recognition that the churches of the Synod give to this act of the congregations and the person whom it has called.”<sup>26</sup>

The CTCR agrees with the thesis that congregations in a confessional fellowship ask for help in joint ventures such as ecclesiastical supervision.

The very existence of the Synod indicates that the church must do some of its work jointly. The Synod is not an alien organization. It is the whole confessional fellowship of congregations. In this case, by common agreement, certain offices are filled by the Synod or its commissions through authority delegated from the congregations.<sup>27</sup>

Since the congregations are the ones asking for help in this important aspect of their duties congregations are responsible for choosing the man to fill the position. Thus Wollenburg writes:

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<sup>22</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Ga 1:8

<sup>23</sup> Walther, C.F.W. *Church and Ministry*, 1987 Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo. p. 332.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 334.

<sup>25</sup> Wollenburg. *An Assessment*. p. 105.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p. 103.

<sup>27</sup> CTCR. *The Ministry*. p. 31.

To preserve the unity of the true faith, and to prevent schism within the confessional fellowship, supervision of the doctrine of pastors and teachers is not only a wholesome practice but a necessary one. Such supervision is intended to prevent factions created by self-appointed leaders who seek to draw men after themselves. The supervision is carried out by those persons whom the churches themselves choose. Thus, it is not imposed upon the congregations by some sort of ecclesiastical authority, but represents a willing subordination of the pastors and congregations to one another in the interest of maintaining the unity of the confession.<sup>28</sup>

## **B. The Church is given the freedom to create offices to assist the Pastoral office.**

Let's spend a moment assuring ourselves that the Church has the freedom to call someone into such an office. It is clear that God has ordained the Pastoral office in the Church. Here it is necessary to cite only the Ephesians four passage that lists the office of Pastor as a gift of God, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers..."<sup>29</sup> The CTCR summarizes the duties of the office in this way:

The ministry of Word and sacrament and the public administration of the Office of the Keys is entrusted to the office of the public ministry. In a congregation, therefore, the man who holds the office of the public ministry is a steward of the mysteries of God. He is the shepherd, overseer, and elder of the church in that place. The ultimate responsibility for what is taught and for guiding the lives of the flock is his.<sup>30</sup>

This is an immense responsibility. It is no wonder then that the Scriptures do not preclude the Church from creating offices to assist this one divinely ordained office. It appears that the Church began to do that immediately. We read in the New Testament about deacons and deaconesses. In addition, according to texts like Acts 6:3 and I Timothy 5:17, it appears that gradations within the office appeared early in the history of the Church.

In the Treatise Jerome is quoted as supporting gradations within the office, for the sake of supervision, in order to prevent schism. The text continues by noting that the distinction between Bishop and Pastor is by human authority; that is, it was created by the Church.

Jerome therefore teaches that the distinction between the grades of bishop and presbyter (or pastor) is by human authority. The fact itself bears witness to this, for the power is the same, as I have already stated. Afterwards one thing made a distinction between bishops and pastors, and this was ordination, for it was decided that one bishop should ordain the ministers in a number of churches. But since the distinction between bishop and pastor is not by divine right, it is manifest that ordination administered by a pastor in his own church is valid by divine right.<sup>31</sup>

On the basis of the foregoing texts the CTCR determined that it is proper to speak of

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<sup>28</sup> Wollenburg, An Assessment. P. 107.

<sup>29</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Eph 4:11

<sup>30</sup> CTCR, The Ministry. p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> Tappert, Theodore G.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 2000, c1959, S. 331.

calling men into these offices, whether they be gradations of the office or auxiliary offices. In the section of the work dealing with definitions the commission writes:

CALL- restricted to the call into the office of the public ministry in the congregation or to another assignment in that ministry. It should be also used for auxiliary offices that are directly supportive of the teaching and preaching function of the pastoral ministry...<sup>32</sup>

### **C. Ecclesiastical supervision is a teaching office.**

A limited number of options exist for the manner in which ecclesiastical supervision may be carried out. Since doctrinal supervision is one of the duties of the pastoral office it would follow that it should be carried out in a pastoral manner.

There are two aspects of this duty. On the positive side, the proactive side, supervision is maintained by teaching. The district president should be teaching the true faith. Since the natural tendency of sinners is to pervert the faith, he should be encouraging his pastors, teachers and congregations to, "...hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful."<sup>33</sup> The district president cannot afford to be shy about this responsibility. He should actively seek opportunities to teach. At pastor's and teacher's conferences, at official visits with congregations, in private visits with pastors and teachers, he should be teaching the true faith. In this way the Word of God will preclude many problems that may have developed without such teaching encouragement.

This duty of the district president is not substantially different than that of the Pastor. Pastors and teachers endure no less an onslaught of temptations and sorrows than the members of their congregations. As the pastor teaches his people, (although obviously on a more regular basis), so also the district president teaches his Pastors, teachers and congregations. When this is done as a servant of the Word of God it will produce similar results as it does in the pastoral office. Trusting relationships of encouragement and support are also built.

On the negative or reactive side supervision is maintained by correction and discipline. From time to time Pastors, teachers, and congregations will teach or behave inappropriately. In such cases the district president must, not only for the sake of duty, but for the sake of the Gospel, act boldly. He cannot afford to be shy about this responsibility either. The only proper, and in fact, loving way to treat those who are erring is to correct them. The district president will use those tools the Synod has given him to seek to win the erring brother. This is a significant statement. The goal is to win the brother not to suspend him.

This duty is likewise not substantially different than that of the Pastor. Pastors are also responsible for the teaching and behavior of their members. From time to time correction and discipline is required on the part of Pastors. As the Pastor corrects and disciplines his people so also the district president will seek to correct and discipline his Pastors, teachers, and congregations. When this is done as a servant of the Word of God it will produce similar results.

One significant difference should be noted. In extreme cases, where impenitence persists, the Pastor carries the ultimate responsibility of leading his congregation to deal with

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<sup>32</sup> CTCR. *The Ministry*. p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Heb 10:23

impenitence through excommunication. The district president does not carry such authority. In extreme cases the district president has the authority to suspend a Pastor, teacher, or congregation from membership in the Synod. It should be noted that this is not the equivalent of excommunication. Nor does the district president remove a person from the call that a congregation has issued. He can suspend the person from membership in the Synod and then hold the congregation responsible, on pain of loss of membership in the Synod, to act accordingly.

In addition, since Pastors and teachers are held to a higher standard, (James 3:1), there will be circumstances when even if the member of Synod is penitent, he or she may be found no longer fit for office. These are very difficult circumstances. They call for wisdom and can only be handled properly when done in a pastoral manner. That manner will require the president to call the member to the high standard of churchmanship, where the offense caused to the Gospel by their teaching or behavior, is the determining factor of continued service in their given office. In other words, it is not so much the district president that suspends as it is the power of God's Word. This is the clear testimony of the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. The Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII speaks of it in this way:

According to divine right, therefore, it is the office of the bishop to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel, and exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose wicked conduct is manifest. All this is to be done not by human power but by God's Word alone. On this account parish ministers and churches are bound to be obedient to the bishops according to the saying of Christ in Luke 10:16, "He who hears you hears me."<sup>34</sup>

The Word of God, in the final analysis, is the primary tool of the district president. Or even more precisely stated, the district president is a tool of the Word of God. He teaches the Word to assist congregations in the maintenance of correct doctrine. He corrects and disciplines with the Word for the same purpose. When the Constitution, Bylaws and resolutions of the Synod become the primary tool of teaching and correction the descent into human law will become evident. The results will be only what law can engender, anger and further rebellion. That is why Article XXVIII of the Confession further states, "This power of keys or of bishops is used and exercised only by teaching and preaching the Word of God and by administering the sacraments (to many persons or to individuals, depending on one's calling)."<sup>35</sup>

#### **D. The Word is only rightly taught when law and Gospel are properly related.**

It should be obvious to any Lutheran that the Word of God is only rightly taught when the Law and the Gospel are properly related. Since the office of the district president is given the responsibility to teach the Word of God it follows that the office cannot be one solely of the law. The district president must also rightly divide Law and Gospel.

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<sup>34</sup>Tappert, Theodore G.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 2000, c1959, S. 84. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>35</sup>Tappert, Theodore G.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 2000, c1959, S. 82

It is true that the district president bears some responsibility, imposed upon him by the kingdom of the left, to report to civil authorities certain kinds of behavior. (Depending on the state in which this supervision is taking place the office of the Pastor has the same reporting responsibilities.) A similar circumstance was experienced at the time of the Reformation, when the Bishops also carried some temporal authority. The reformers sought to clarify this situation when they confessed in the Augsburg, Article XVIII,

In cases where bishops possess temporal authority and the sword, they possess it not as bishops by divine right, but by human, imperial right, bestowed by Roman emperors and kings for the temporal administration of their lands. Such authority has nothing at all to do with the office of the Gospel.<sup>36</sup>

“Such authority has nothing at all to do with the office of the Gospel.” A clear distinction must be made in these circumstances. The district president, and those whom he serves, cannot afford to be confused about which authority he is acting under at any given moment. That is why the Confessors were at pains to clarify that the power of the office was the Word of God. In the Treatise it is noted that the authority of the office is not given by that of the Papacy but by the Word of God.

Since Paul clearly testifies that he did not desire to seek confirmation from Peter, even after he had come to him, he teaches that the authority of the ministry depends on the Word of God, that Peter was not superior to the other apostles, and that ordination or confirmation was not to be sought from Peter alone.<sup>37</sup>

This authority is properly realized only through the teaching of both Law and Gospel.

### **III. Ecclesiastical supervision makes use of Word and Sacrament.**

With these foundational thoughts in place we may now look at the details of the functions of district presidents. We have talked about how we may understand the office of district president and the nature of ecclesiastical supervision. With these two considerations forming the parameters we can now discuss what a district president may do and what he may not do.

#### **A. District Presidents may preach.**

The teaching aspect of the district president’s office has already been noted. Here a special, additional privilege and responsibility must be discussed. The prophetic voice of the Church is heard as men, called by the Church, speak the Word of God to the people of God from the pulpit. This holy task should be handled with trembling spirit. It is no light thing to presume to speak the Word of God.

District presidents do not have a pulpit to which they have been specifically called. When they are asked to preach they should recognize the exceptional nature of the invitation.

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<sup>36</sup>Tappert, Theodore G.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 2000, c1959, S. 83

<sup>37</sup>Tappert, Theodore G.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 2000, c1959, S. 321. (Emphasis added)

Whenever they preach it is from another man's pulpit. The offer to allow the district president to preach is within the Church's good order because he has been ordained and is within the office of the public ministry. However, it should not be considered a right, and should always be accepted with thanksgiving.

That being said, preaching is perhaps the most effective form of ecclesiastical supervision. For in the sermon the Word of God is applied to specific circumstances in the lives of God's people. This is no place for lofty teaching, or Synodical commercials. This is a matter of death and resurrection. When the district president is asked to preach at special occasions in congregations he is afforded the opportunity to bring the power of God's Word to bear. Care should be taken on his part not to shift the honor the congregation rightly gives the Word of God to himself or his office.

When the president is asked by his Pastors or teachers to preach to them a more marvelous event is transpiring. The occupational hazard of those who preach is that they do not hear the Word of God in an objective manner because they are listening to their own voice. It is a high and holy duty to proclaim the Word of God to those who hold the office of the public ministry or an auxiliary office. From a holy sense of service the district president should seek the opportunity to share clear words of Law and Gospel, in order to kill and to raise again to joyous life, those whom God has put under his care. With great care He will apply the Word of God to lift the burden of life from the servants of Christ, and help them to see that Jesus has already borne the burden for them.

#### **B. District Presidents may preside over the sacraments.**

A more complicated set of issues is created by the question of whether the district president may preside over the sacraments. We may answer with a qualified, yes. Again, this privilege stems from the fact that he has been declared fit for the office through his ordination, and is within the office of the public ministry. In general the Pastor of the congregation should administer the sacraments. However, there may be times when the Church benefits from this action. For example, the local Pastor and congregation might invite the district president to baptize his grandchild. This may be done simply as an expression of the unutterable joy that God gives His people when they see the miracle of new life. The local congregation desires to share that joy with the biological family and as a result the entire Church is blessed.

Similarly, there may be times when the district president is asked to fill a vacancy or some other special circumstance when the congregation desires to receive the Lord's Supper. This may be done simply for the sake of sharing the benefits of the reception of the body and blood of the Savior. If a congregation and its Pastor requests this service of the district president he should have a very good reason for refusing.

One of the factors to be considered is whether the Church may be harmed by the confusion of roles that this practice might convey. The district president is not the Pastor of those who are receiving the Sacrament from his hand. It would not be healthy for the Church to defend this practice by characterizing the offering the Lord's Supper as an emergency circumstance. So the best practice is for the people of God to receive the body and blood of their Savior from the hand of their Pastor. The shepherd feeds his sheep. This is also the only way for proper Pastoral care to take place. A visiting district president cannot know who should or who should not be receiving the sacrament. Few elders have the constitution required to tell

the district president what he should or should not do. Therefore, it is best if the district president does not preside over the Lord's Supper except in extraordinary circumstances.

### **C. District Presidents may hear confession.**

What sweeter means of ecclesiastical supervision could there be than the personal application of the absolution? Troubled hearts and troubled minds afflict Pastors and teachers with the same regularity as the general population. In fact, there is recent evidence to suggest that many within the Pastoral office find that office to be detrimental to their physical, spiritual, and emotional health.<sup>38</sup> These children of God need to hear the word of absolution applied to their souls.

The world jettisons the notion of sin and offers this advice: be happy with who you are. Other confessions within the Christian Church offer the idea that they should try harder, believe harder, work harder and they will overcome sin. Such solutions are no solutions. They lead only to despair. The Lutheran Confessions recognize that God has created one way to kill sin: the way of confession and absolution.

There should be some way to offer this precious gift to our Pastors and teachers. By not providing a means for confession and absolution we may be communicating that it is inconsequential. In many cases these servants of the Lord will find a confessor for themselves. However, some may be uncomfortable confessing to fellow Pastors within their circuits. Others may simply desire to confess to a person of another form of service. In such cases it would be appropriate for the district president to offer this service to those under his care. This is within good order because he is ordained and is within the office of the ministry.

Some have objected to this practice by suggesting that the kingdom of the left hand responsibilities that the district president bears would preclude him from hearing confession. In, by far, the majority of cases this would not be a concern. At any rate, every Pastor that hears confession is at risk of coming up against the same difficult circumstances. If someone were to confess a grievous, ongoing sin to a Pastor, one that put his members or his community at risk he would have the same moral dilemma that is posited as reason for the district president not to hear the confession of his Pastors. The reality is that such circumstances are highly unlikely. The exception should not be used to prohibit the benefits of this gift.

There is a difference between the hearing of a confession by a Pastor and by a district president. Very few Pastors will hear the confession of someone for whom they have any vocational responsibility. District presidents can, in extreme cases, restrict or suspend those for whom they are caring. Two points should be made in response to this possibility. In the first place, confession is heard for the sake of absolution. This reality would have to weigh strongly in any case that might be considered extreme. In other words, the desire to confess and be absolved would be included in the evaluation of the case.

The second point is that if an extreme case were heard in the confessional, the district president would have an early opportunity to work with that Pastor or teacher. He would seek

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<sup>38</sup> A 2010 Fuller Institute, George Barna, and Pastoral Care Inc. survey entitled "Personal Impact of the Pastoral Ministry" found that 80% of those serving in the Pastoral office in the United States felt that the ministry negatively affected their families. 33% felt that it was an outright hazard. 70% said that they are constantly fighting depression.

to bring the Word of God to bear so that the worker would choose to follow the course laid out by that Word.

The central issue should not be what kind of difficulties may come. Sin, trials, difficult decisions are sure to come. Woe to him by whom they come. The central issue should be the benefits that might be gained by Pastors and teachers if they have a personal word of absolution applied to them. There could never be pressure, or coercion, or even expectation for the Pastor or teacher to use the district president in this way. It is a blessing that may be offered.

### **Conclusion**

The question of whether the district president is a Pastor to the Pastors has been debated in our circles from time to time. Under the current LCMS polity this is certainly not true, in fact. The Pastors have not called the district president to be their Pastor. However, there may be cases where it is true in effect. Since the district president is charged with a function of the office of the public ministry, and since this part can only be effected by the power of the Word, the district president cannot fulfill this responsibility without speaking the Word of God in a pastoral manner. In this duty both he and his hearers will be blessed.

SDG

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East/South Circuit Pastors Conference

Billings

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