



Five Brief Devotions for Congregations in Call Process

By the Rev. Ronald Olson, Director of Admissions, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

+++++

I. In Calling a Pastor, We Consider Our Own Calling

*Writing to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul encouraged believers there to consider their own call. As we begin our work as a congregation in the call process, we may consider the call we all have from God by exploring a few of the following scriptures: **Acts 2:39, Ephesians 4:4-6, Colossians 3:15, 1 Timothy 6:12, 1 Peter 39, and 1 John 3:1***

What a calling – to hope, peace, eternal life! In these verses, all of us are called children of God. Clearly, this is on account of God's power and wisdom, not our own.

This powerful call is the one that comes to all believers through God's Word in Holy Baptism. That is why Martin Luther was bold to insist that "the ministry of the Word belongs to all." And again, "There is no other Word of God than that which is given all Christians to proclaim." (from Luther's *Concerning the Ministry*, 1523) Just as all Christians share the promise, so too do we share the task of proclamation. Most of us take up the task in the ministry of daily life. Others we ask to do so publicly for the community so faith can be created and sustained in us. So we see that in the economy of God's grace the ministry of those called and ordained follows from the call which has come to all who believe.

How do we sense God's call most clearly? In which aspect of life do we find God's Word (the promise, the hope, the peace) being "proclaimed" in the strongest way? The Bible even speaks of us as "holy partners in a heavenly calling." (Hebrews 3:1) What do you think that might mean for daily living?

Gracious calling God, call on us with your grace again and again. Renew us daily in the peace, hope, and eternal life we have been promised and which we have been called to proclaim. As we work to call a pastor to our congregation, may we count on the prayers of all members of this community of faith to uphold us, just as we trust your Spirit to guide us. We remember, God, you are the One who called us first. Amen.

+++++

II. In Calling a Pastor, We Consider God's Gifts

God's gracious giving extends to the church, too. God has not been content to let the church fend for itself since Pentecost. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit still enlivens the community of faith. As Bishop April Ulring Larson has said, "What God is interested in is empowering the body of Christ." God has raised up leaders, gifted ministers and pastors for the church in all times and places. When the church has prayed, "Save and defend your whole Church, purchased with the precious blood of Christ. Give it pastors and ministers filled with your Spirit, and strengthen it through the Word and the holy sacraments," God has answered.

Listen to this wonderful scripture: II Peter 1:3-11. Would any of us, either as individual believers or as members together of a congregation, have any reason to question the truth of those verses? In

fact, how have the promises offered there been answered and proved true in your experiences of the life of faith? In the life of our congregation?

We overhear the prayer that scripture offers up for us in Ephesians 3:14-21. The One who has called us is also at work in us doing far more than we can ask or imagine. That's an amazing thought!

As we join in singing or saying LBW 543, "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty," focus on verse two and ask, "What does that verse mean, promise, and say to us about God's watch over us?" Can we claim this hymn's great promise even in calling a new pastor?

Luther's Small Catechism offers his explanation of the third and fourth petitions of the Lord's Prayer saying: "God's will is done when he strengthens our faith and keeps us firm in his Word as long as we live."

And, "Daily bread includes everything needed for this life, such as food and clothing, home and property, work and income, a devoted family, an orderly community, good government, favorable weather, peace and health, a good name, and true friends and neighbors."

We daily trust God's good gifts for our faith and life. Such confidence also belongs to the faith and life of the whole church.

***Gracious giving God,** give us your help again, just as you have always done. Remind us of your care. Let there be gratitude in our congregation, for all that is needful has been sent and ordained for us already. As we work to call a new pastor to our congregation, may we be strengthened for this task with the thought that your providing reaches to every need of your church. This call committee and community of believers are your church, too. Amen.*

+++++

III. In Calling a Pastor, We Consider Congregation and Community Needs

The Apostle Paul provides a wonderful "snapshot" of life in a Christian community in his first letter to the Thessalonian church: I Thessalonians 5:12-24

This letter of Paul, one of the earliest Christian writings, already shows Paul's love of lists. Here he checks off some of the characteristics of faithful community life –

- respect for those who labor among us;
- peace among ourselves;
- help for the weak;
- patience with all;
- always seeking to do good to one another and to all;
- prayer without ceasing;
- no quenching of the Spirit;
- holding fast to what is good.

That is a lot to be and do in the freedom of the gospel. That is a tall order for a mission congregation. Could this be the first "Congregational Profile"? Our congregation today is also the location of worship, care and mission, and full of needs in order to give ourselves faithfully to this gospel work. Let's name some of these community needs.

Is calling a new pastor more a matter of finding someone to meet those needs (do all those things), or of calling one to lead the congregation to do what needs to be done? Are we, as members of our congregation, only objects of ministry, or are we also subjects/agents of ministry? When we consider congregational "needs," scripture points us right away to the Christian mission that needs doing in God's world, and the gospel work in which we share responsibility. Fortunately, in our need, there are leaders to help us. And we are in the process of calling one of them into our midst.

***Gracious sanctifying God,** thank you for drawing us ever anew into the ministry of the Word. In the community of faith, we are empowered for witness and service even as we are ministered to with forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing. As we work to call a new pastor to our congregation, show us our neediness – what we need and what needs doing for our life together in Christ. Amen.*

+++++

IV. In Calling a Pastor, We Consider Ministry Gifts

If the Bible is to be believed, then God has only “gifted” children. We have this declaration from

Ephesians 4:7, 11-16. Gifts galore!

God has given ministry gifts to the people of God, to the church, for the benefit of all. We know, of course, that we do not all have all the gifts. And, some having just the gifts they have been given are also called into the church's public ministry, into the ministry of Word and Sacrament. The Apostle Paul liked the image of the body, one body with many parts all working together –
I Corinthians 12:27-30.

We may all sense that we possess certain “gifts for ministry.” It is no accident that some members end up teaching Sunday School year after year – we are not all up to that important work. Some are very comfortable in front of others, leading worship, teaching Bible studies and the like – others are not. We may also sense that our whole congregation, the community taken as one, is gifted, too, in a special position or especially equipped for a particular ministry or mission.

Think of some of the special gifts our former pastors had. Which ones did they have in common? What were their unique gifts for ministry, for leadership in the church? What gifts are going to be most important to our congregation in the years ahead? Most likely, there is no single gift that will identify our new pastor to us. Nor is there only one who possesses the gifts we seek.

There are many gifted leaders in the church, thank God. So the difficulty of the task at hand is not so much that there are no good candidates or that there is only one pastor who could lead us in mission. Oftentimes, part of the hard work of a call committee is leaving room for the Holy Spirit in the discernment of the many gifts in the candidates God may send. Our task is never simply a matter of “hiring” someone, even the “best” someone we can find, but of allowing God's Spirit to work in and through us to build up the church in calling a new pastor. And that can happen, indeed, because God is at work with us in all of this.

***Gracious gifting God,** we are reminded of your gifts in and for all the children of the church. Call on our gifts now, use us, in service of your whole church. As we work to call a new pastor to our congregation, may your Holy Spirit lead us to discern the gifts we seek and see those gifts clearly in the candidates you are sending to us. In our communications, interviews and meetings with them, may we find ourselves once again who we surely are in Christ Jesus, stewards of your many gifts. Amen.*

++++

V. In Calling a Pastor, We Consider the Changing Context/New Opportunities and Challenges

Listen to Colossians 3:12-17. We are being changed. That is what the Spirit of Christ is doing with us.

There is a marvelous new-life prayer in the “Evening Prayer/Vespers” of the LBW:
Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We are not the same congregation we were last year, or ten years ago. Times have changed, things have changed, we have changed since last calling a pastor. What do those changes mean for the calling of a new one? What is different now? How has our community felt the changes? Changing demographics, aging populations, new immigrants, all these factors make for renewal in mission and ministry, too, in service and witness for the community of faith. Let's take some time to reflect yet again on these new opportunities and challenges as a committee.

Are we more open as a congregation to see the gifts of a candidate we may not have considered so seriously before? Many congregations have found that to be true, for example, in looking at single candidates, female and older candidates. Pastor Eleanor Hunsberger states the matter boldly, “When God calls you to ministry as a person of color, a person who is physically challenged, a person who is different, who does not fit the Lutheran mold of this is what a pastor looks like...somehow the Holy Spirit removes the barriers and people are able to open up to receive such people.” She goes on to say, “We’re helping God, we’re working with the Holy Spirit in this process.” We refresh ourselves in these words from scripture about our life in the Spirit: Romans 8:26-30. We are so called according to God's purpose. The times may be changing, but we are standing on that solid promise.

Gracious accompanying God, the One in whom we live and move and have our being, give us a vision of the times of our lives, the new situations in which we live out our faith in Jesus. May we ask anew what it means to be the Church in our time, our place. And as we work to call a new pastor to our congregation, may we welcome according to your Spirit the one you are sending to us to lead us into the new days ahead. Amen.