

Encouragement on Soul Care Coming out of the Pandemic

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The three-part presentation for this conference focuses on challenges we face bringing the gospel to people because of the pandemic. I was asked to share some encouragements about caring for individual souls by reaching out to members we weren't allowed to visit during the pandemic, long-term delinquents, or those who haven't returned to church because of the pandemic. I was also asked to address the new outreach opportunities the Lord has provided through the pandemic.

Another issue I was asked to touch on was the growing concern and need for mental health care for members affected by the pandemic. Wanting an expert's thoughts on this topic, I had a chance to speak on several occasions with Mr. Dan Nommensen from Christian Family Solutions (CFS). Later in this presentation, I will share some of the insights he shared with me. But for now, I wanted to begin with one of his thoughts because it underscored the overarching theme of what I was asked to present today regarding the strength of Lutheran ministry in personally applying the Means of Grace. Here was the thought he shared: *Establishing a personal relationship with the client, "therapeutic rapport," leads to a better outcome in dealing with mental health issues.*

What an important thought for us to keep in mind as we consider the gospel work we are called to do. Whether we are pastors, teachers, or lay leaders in our congregations, the care of individual souls is bringing them the only cure for souls, the forgiveness of sins in Word and sacrament. But that's not the only way we care for souls. We also want to help in making sure they have the proper care for body and mind as well.

1) An encouragement to remember that our highest priority is the care for souls through the Means of Grace.

One comment that I have heard down through the years from nurses and staff at various institutions for the sick and the aged is, "You Lutheran pastors are the clergy we see most often making regular calls on your members."

I know that clergy from other church bodies visit their members in the hospitals and nursing homes too. How often they do that I don't know. But what I do know is that making regular visits with our members in their own homes, in hospitals, and in nursing homes should be a high priority for our pastors. Why is that? I believe that we make the personal care of souls a priority because we believe in the power of the Means of Grace. We believe and confess that it is through the Word and sacraments that the Holy Spirit works to create and strengthen faith in Jesus. That is why we make personal ministry a priority. We care for souls by bringing the only cure for their souls which is the forgiveness of sins. The Scriptures clearly state, "Faith comes from hearing the

message and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). With our Lutheran fathers we also confess that in Article 5 of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession:

So that we might receive this faith, God established the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. For the Holy Spirit is given to people through the Word and sacraments, the tools through which God works. Whenever and wherever it pleases God, this ministry creates faith in the hearts of those who hear the gospel. And the gospel message is this: that not because of our own merits, but for Christ’s sake, God justifies those who believe that they are received into grace because of what Christ did.

As we heard in the previous paper by Pastor Moldenhauer, we first and foremost care for souls collectively in public worship on Sundays. From Pastor Arndt we will hear that we can also do that in our schools, in Bible classes, and in family devotions. But it’s equally important to bring that gospel care to souls individually in their home, in the hospital room, and in the nursing home.

In so doing, we follow the example of the Great Physician, the Lord Jesus, who often went to the homes of people who needed him. Yes, like pastors today, Jesus preached to crowds of people in local synagogues and in the Temple courts, in “church” if you will. But he also took the time to deal one-on-one with those who needed that. Think of the time he spent with Nicodemus privately and with a woman at Jacob’s well who had come to fetch water all by herself because she was a social outcast. Think of the effort Jesus made to single out Zacchaeus who was standing in a tree trying to see him. Looking up into the tree Jesus said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down for I must spend time at your house today.” We think of how he went out of his way to visit in the home of Mary and Martha and the two Emmaus disciples on that first Easter Sunday evening. As we look at the ministry of Jesus and how he made efforts to serve sinners one-on-one, we think of what Isaiah wrote about the Redeemer’s approach to such care of souls: “A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out” (Is. 42:3).

One-on-one care for souls was part of the apostles’ ministry as well. In Acts 20:28 Paul told the pastors at Ephesus, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” In 1 Thessalonians 2:15 Paul reminded the Thessalonians of how he served them one-on-one. “For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.” And when Cornelius, at the Lord’s direction, invited Peter to come to his home, there was no delay. The Scriptures say “The next day Peter started out...Then Peter began to speak...All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:23b-46).

Are there “reeds” and “smoldering wicks” among our people because of the pandemic? There surely are. So how are we to go about serving them when they are staying away from the “crowds” in public worship? In other words, what can we do to get one-on-one with them to apply the Means of Grace? Jesus, the Good Shepherd said, “I know my sheep and they know me, and they listen to my voice.” How can the sheep know their shepherds or how can the shepherds know their sheep unless they work at developing that “therapeutic relationship?” Visiting the sheep one-on-one is the way to do it.

2) An encouragement to care for the souls of those who are not coming to God’s house by going to their houses.

I don’t know who first said it or where I first heard it, but I believe there is truth in the saying, “Home-going pastors make church-going people.” And to whose homes should the pastors or the elders be going? The homes to which we should be going can fall under four basic categories—those who can’t come to church, those who don’t come to church, those who won’t come to church, and those who are looking for a church.

The most obvious group of members to whom we should be going are those who cannot come to church because of sickness, advanced age, or deteriorating health. I trust that all pastors are making regular visits with such members. Speaking from pastoral and personal experience, such members especially need care for their souls. When the body is weakened with sickness, age, or immobility, the devil likes to torture that soul and he has a willing accomplice in the sinful heart that often questions God’s love at such times. It is important at such times and for such people that the shepherds visit. That’s what the Good Shepherd did! When the centurion sent messengers to ask Jesus to come to his house to heal his servant, Jesus didn’t say, “I am too busy right now.” No, Luke tells us “He went with them.” Jesus made it a priority to visit the sick and dying, and so should we. I don’t recall exactly how he said it, but President Schroeder has offered this encouragement to the pastors of our District, “Brothers, some of the most important work you do is the visits you make in hospitals and in the homes of your shut-ins.”

One of the ways the pandemic has affected the care of souls in the pastor’s routine is visiting the shut-ins. Getting back to getting out among God’s people regularly was difficult after the government required us to stay home. And I will confess it for myself, putting off these visits is a temptation with which pastors struggle because “The shut-ins aren’t going anywhere and I can always see them next week. Right now, I have more important things to do like visiting a prospect, attending that special meeting, writing a sermon, etc.” Yes, there are many important things we need to do in gospel work, but we can’t forget the shut-ins. In fact, caring for the souls of the aged is going to be an ever expanding ministry. In his book “A Christian Guide to Mental Illness,” Steven Saunders references the Census Bureau’s statistic that by 2050, one in four people will be 65 years or older (Saunders, 2016). Who will visit these sheep when they get to the point of not being able to come to church? Indeed, because of the growing numbers, pastors may need to call upon elders or other leaders in the congregation to help visit

these members. That's good, because the efficacy of the Means of Grace is not in the man who visits, but in the message that is brought. But, I believe that such help by lay members should be to supplement the pastor's work, not supplant it.

One final encouragement about regular visits with shut-ins and hospital calls is this: such visits are not only a blessing for those who are visited, but also for those who are making the visit! In Pastoral Theology class, our professor made this comment: If you are having a "bad" day, go visit some of your shut-ins. They will pick your spirits up. I have found that to be true.¹ When you hear their confession of faith in Jesus, when you sense the comfort they have received from Word and sacrament, we you see their tears of joy, and when you hear their words of thanks, you ask for God's forgiveness for ever thinking that such work is too great a burden or not all that important.

Another category is those who don't come to God's house for a variety of reasons, but in the end, are despising the Means of Grace. Although we bemoan the challenges the pandemic caused for our gospel work, it has also provided new opportunities to reach out to share God's Word. And the sheep who is straying needs the shepherd to leave the ninety-nine and go after him. And the pandemic provides us a "fresh" way to do that.

Usually, every congregation has that list of members who haven't been in church for years in spite of the phone calls, the visits, and the letters calling them back home. But this time, when we approach them, we can use a different "line." This time when we call, text, or visit, we don't have to say, "Why aren't you coming to church?" This time we can say, "I'm reaching out to see how you are doing during this pandemic. Is there anything we can do to help you? Do you need some groceries brought in, a lawn cut, or just errands run? We don't want anything from you, we just want to help you in any way we can. And, oh by the way, you may not feel comfortable coming to church with all that has gone on with the virus, but if you want, I know that pastor would come and bring you the Lord's Supper in your home. Can I have him call you to set up an appointment?"

We have made some of those phone calls at St. Paul in Lake Mills. We need to do more. But one thing that has surprised me is that often the response to such phone calls or visits has been, "Thanks for calling and, oh by the way, I really appreciate the worship services online." I know that we want our members to gather together in God's house for worship. Pastor Moldenhauer reminded us of the blessings we experience of

¹ Frieda was her name. She lived past 100 years. Being the oldest of four sisters on the farm, she didn't have the opportunity to go to school like the rest. She had to stay home to help her dad cut wood, milk the cows, and take care of the crops. When her health and strength prevented her from coming to church, I visited her in her home. Although I was the called servant of the Word, she taught me some important life lessons from the Bible. In spite of little formal education, she had a sharp mind and taught me some important things about the meaning of God's Word. Over the years, she taught herself how to play the harmonica. So, when I visited, she insisted on playing an opening hymn for the private communion service on that harmonica and when we had finished with the blessing, she insisted on playing a closing hymn. I always left her house feeling like I left with so much more than what I brought.

being together in person. But I also would like to think that God's Word is still efficacious even if it comes over the internet. If they are listening to or watching services online, let's trust that God's Word will work in their hearts so that when we do call or visit, we will have a more pleasant reception.

But there is another category of those who are staying away from God's house. They are the members who had regularly worshiped in God's house in the past, but since the pandemic they won't come to church for reasons we may not know. From my own experience, I believe that most pastors could quickly tell you who these members are and they too need one-on-one attention. But here's the challenge, are they staying away because they are truly afraid of getting the virus? Are they staying away because they are struggling with some other mental illness that the pandemic has brought to the surface, such as agoraphobia? Or, are they staying away because they have fallen into a comfortable habit of falling into their sofa or recliner on Sunday morning to "do church online" wearing pajamas and drinking a cup of coffee? Or, is it because they are now sinfully despising God's Word by neglecting to hear and learn it at church or online? Efforts to care for the souls of members in this category call for patient and discerning pastoral care as in applying the Law to point out sin as well as sharing the gospel which alone has the power to change hearts and behavior regarding the Third Commandment. But how will one be able to distinguish between legitimate fears about being in public and sinful habits that need to be exposed if one doesn't make personal contact? This is where the old adage applies—home-going pastors make church going-people.

The final category of people are the ones who are either unchurched or looking for a church. Do you recall what Peter did when messengers came asking him to come to the home of the gentile Cornelius who wanted to hear the good news of the Savior? Peter didn't say, "Tell him to come to church this weekend." No, he went to his home and shared the good news of salvation.

From the personal reports of many fellow pastors and congregations, the pandemic may have hindered our ability to care for souls like we had in the past, but it has provided new opportunities to share the gospel not only with our own members but with others who may have found us online or who are looking for a new school for their children. My experience is that people who found our church online or looking for a new school to escape mask mandates or curricula that are ever-growing in their suppression of even the natural knowledge of God let alone the revealed knowledge of God have found the Savior in our gospel ministries.² How important it is that we follow up on these prospects with a personal contact one soul at a time.

² A quick scan of membership changes in 2020 and 2021 at St. Paul shows that we have had 21 adult "Covid" confirmations, 18 new "Covid students" in our LES, and 11 "Covid" baptisms.

3. An encouragement to care for souls with care for the body and the mind.

Obviously, the thing that all people need is the good news that Jesus has won free and full forgiveness for all sins. It is the gospel that provides the real and lasting rest for souls. Jesus said, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:25). But sometimes, it is through physical help for the body and mind that we have an opportunity to provide spiritual care for the soul. The apostle John reminds us that taking care of someone's bodily need is the way we show our love (1John 3), and such love by helping with someone who has physical needs can create an opening to share God's saving love too. Jesus himself would often take care of bodily needs as a platform to care for the soul's need. The early Christian church did likewise as James encouraged first century Christians, "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord...And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well" (James 5:14,15).

In speaking with Dan Nommensen, a big reason for emphasizing the one-on-one care for souls, post-pandemic, is the increase of mental health issues. Consider these statistics:

Before the pandemic, most studies indicated 20% of people had a "diagnosable" mental health issue. Today, the prevalence of mental health concerns has dramatically risen with some studies showing as much as 50% of the population may struggle with symptoms related to anxiety and depression.

Pre-pandemic, CFS could arrange for a client to see a therapist in one to two weeks. Because of the growing need, it may now take up to six weeks for an initial appointment for those with particular areas of concern such as marital discord or mental health concerns with young children.

Community mental health clinics in many parts of the country are booking out 4-8 months for an initial appointment.

In 2020 CFS had 41,000 billable "encounters." In 2021 they have had, 83,000 billable "encounters."

More called workers, especially younger teachers, have struggled and have sought help from CFS during and after the pandemic.

The Western Wisconsin District is considering raising the district dues because of the growing demand among called workers for help regarding mental health issues.

The CDC has reported that suicide, which is the second leading cause of death among young people, has increased.

As I listened with my pastor's ears to this list of mental health issues post-pandemic, my pastor's mind thought, "Can we help by offering Bible classes and sermons on marriage relationships, depression, and suicide?" The answer I received is that the ones who need it most won't come because that's part of the challenge for those suffering mental health issues—they isolate themselves from the support systems that are in place. In other words, developing a "personal relationship" with those struggling with mental health issues, "therapeutic rapport," is the first step in getting them the professional therapy they need. That's what "soul care" is all about it.

But who should do that? At the seminary pastors receive some training in counseling and members will often turn to their pastors for counseling. Pastors can offer help from Scripture, prayer, and practical experience. But there will be situations when a pastor cannot provide the kind of counseling that people need. Since mental health is a medical issue, members may need more than the spiritual help. In addition to therapy, a person struggling with mental health issues may need medicine or even hospitalization. So, one of the things a pastor and the elders can do is learn how to recognize when a member is struggling with their mental health and have contacts to whom they can refer members. Since our teachers are on front-line of gospel ministry on a daily basis with children, they too should be trained in recognizing signs from their students who might be struggling with some mental health issue.

If members are willing to seek professional help for their mental health issue, they often prefer a Christian therapist. But insurance restrictions or coverage can be an obstacle to arranging therapy with a Christian therapist. So, through a pastor's referral members can receive Christian counseling from licensed therapists at no cost to them and a reduced cost to the congregation through the CFS Member Assistance Program. An added blessing of using that program is that the CFS therapists work hand-in-hand with the client's pastor to provide soul-care professionally and pastorally. This goes back to the thought with which we started—a "therapeutic rapport," leads to a better outcome in dealing with the body, soul, and mind.

4. So, what can pastors, teachers, congregational leaders, and fellow members do in helping to care for soul? Here are some final thoughts and encouragement:

- a) Make sure you have an accurate membership list with the correct contact information. We have to know whom we are to serve if we are going to serve them.
- b) Support your pastor(s) in the work of one-on-one soul care including holding them accountable for that work. Do you include a "pastor's report" as part of the council/elder's agenda to encourage pastors in their work of visiting members?

- c) Train the elders, present and past, in how to engage in the work of reaching out to those who need personal attention.
- d) Enable your pastors to make “every-member visits.” Rather than just pay for guest preachers so the pastor can go on vacation, what about paying for guest preachers for a month or so, so the pastor can make visits on every member?
- e) Together with the elders, pastors should learn as much as they can about recognizing mental health issues and how to provide the help members need through trained and licensed mental health providers. A book published by NPH is a good place to start. It’s entitled “*A Christian Guide to Mental Illness, Volume 1: Recognizing Mental Illness in the Church and School.*”
- f) If you haven’t made use of the Member Assistance Program by CFS, consider doing that. If you already make use of it, consider increasing the budgetary amount so that more can benefit when needed. Contact CFS if you would like more information.
- g) Pray! How often do pastors and elders pray for the members, especially those who need one-on-one soul care? If each pastoral staff or elders’ meeting started with prayers for specific members they are trying to help, what would happen? Hasn’t the Lord said “You have not because you ask not?” What about the School Board or faculty? How often does the School Board begin its meeting with a prayer for the faculty? How often do teachers pray for individual students and their families? Jesus said, “The prayer of a righteous person accomplishes much.” Perhaps if we would spend more time folding our hands in prayer, we would spend less time wringing them in worry about what to do!

5. Offer encouragement by discussing/answering the following questions:

- a) What “can give” in a pastor’s schedule to enable him to make more home visits?
- b) Share best practices/programs in keeping accurate record of your membership.
- c) Making “every member visits” is not only a good idea, it is essential in soul care. Discuss the challenges of every member visits and how to overcome those challenges.
- d) In years gone by, the weekly envelope or the Friendship Register were ways in which we tried to track those who were in worship and those who weren’t. With on-line services and giving, as well as reluctance to handle shared items such as Friendship Registers and offering plates, discuss ideas about how churches can acquire accurate information about who is and is not worshipping.
- e) What can congregations do to help pastors, teachers, leaders, and members understand and recognize mental health issues?

References

Saunders, S. M. (2016). *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness, Volume 1: Recognizing Mental Illness in the Church and School*. Northwestern Publishing House.

Conversations with Dan Nommensen from Christian Life Resources on May 4 and May 14, 2022.