

On Improving Your Pastor

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District President

So you want to improve your pastor? There's nothing wrong for which he can be removed from office in your parish, but you think he could do better, be a better pastor.

More than that, you also know just what he needs to do to improve! Should you tell him? How do you tell him? You want him to grow, of course, so you go to him with your laundry list of complaints – concerns you have, plus some you have “heard” from others.

Now pastors who are wise will listen to and benefit from constructive criticism. But pastors are human, too, sinners just like you! When the list of faults is long and the discussion becomes personal, it's not hard for the pastor (and his family!) to become more and more discouraged.

I ask you, who benefits from that? From a discouraged pastor who's “down in the dumps”? No one! (And believe me, I've seen and talked with my share of discouraged pastors.) But you still really would like your pastor to grow and improve! What do you do?

Here are some questions you first need to ask yourself (actually, this article developed from a conversation I had along these lines with Pastor Mark Willig of St. John's in Chester, IL, one of our circuit counselors).

So you want to improve your pastor? Are you Lutheran? “Well, of course I am!” you respond. Then you will remember that Lutherans believe in the means of grace, that God does His work of saving, forgiving, encouraging, strengthening us in faith through His Word and through Baptism and Holy Communion. That means when we speak God's Word, God Himself is speaking through us to accomplish His purposes.

Now here's another question. Do the means of grace also work on pastors? Does the Word of God work, is God also speaking when someone speaks that Word TO a pastor? Yes, of course He is, right? Perhaps you haven't thought of it this way, but this is exactly what pastors need!

If your pastor grows in faith, it will help him be a better pastor, right? How do we grow in the faith? As Lutherans we know we use the means of grace. So, how do you “improve” your pastor? You use the means of grace on him. You can't baptize him all over again, but you can use the Word of God on him. In fact, the most important thing you can do for your pastor is to speak the Word of God to him. Tell him of Jesus Christ and His love for him. Tell him that Jesus died and rose also for him. Demonstrate that Word of God to him by your words and actions.

It happened to me one Lent at least 15 years ago. We had come through some minor difficulties in our parish (I don't even remember what they were) when some women of the parish, during Holy Week, took it on themselves to send me a card, a flower, a word of encouragement from the Word of God every day that week before Easter. God used them, spoke through them, to “improve” their pastor. And I was truly strengthened for the task of bringing the resurrection Gospel with renewed vigor that year.

What I am advocating for you, the lay people reading this, is a simple approach centered in the Word of God. We are Lutherans. We believe God Himself speaks in His Word. So SPEAK that Word to one another, and especially to your pastor.

What you will find is that you will not “improve” your pastor – we can’t do it anyway – but that God will. He can and He does work through His Word. What does Jesus say about your pastor? He’s forgiven, washed in Jesus’ blood, just like you are.

That’s why we want to make the center of our meetings, our very life together, the speaking of God’s Word to one another. See each other through the eyes of Jesus, who loves each of us with an everlasting love. God “improves” us by forgiving us, restoring us, renewing us in Jesus Christ.

Just in case there are any pastors reading this, it works the other way, too. So you want to “improve” (or grow!) your congregation? Are you Lutheran? Yes? Bring the means of grace to them, over and over. Speak the Word of God to them, day in and day out, the Word focused on Jesus. Keep on speaking. It’s what you have been given to do, even when you are tired of it. Tell them what a blessing it is to serve them with the Gospel.

God will work through His Word – He promised! – to accomplish His purpose. May we in our parishes, pastor and people, live as St. Paul describes the church in Thessalonica: “We also thank God continually because, when you received the Word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the Word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13 NIV).

A blessed Easter to one and all!

A Few Notes from Pastor Willig

To add to what our District President has said:

The Word of God is one of those “Means of Grace” things. In fact the Word of God is the central part in the whole idea of Means of Grace. The Means of Grace are what God uses to work faith in us. It is a powerful idea and comes right out of the Bible. We also talk about Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as Means of Grace, but in both Baptism and the Lord’s Supper it is the Word of God that makes them what they are. Do you remember the words from your Small Catechism? (About Baptism) “Certainly not just water, but the Word of God in and with the water does these things”; (and about the Lord’s Supper) “Certainly not just eating and drinking . . . but the words”. Without the Word of God they would not be what they are supposed to be, but with the Word of God things happen. Sins are forgiven. Faith is created and strengthened. And with Baptism and the Lord’s Supper we have actual quotes from Jesus Himself! Words He spoke we get to hear!

So if it is “Means of Grace” it is special. It is something that God uses to: Give Life; Create Faith; Forgive Sin; Renew Faith; Strengthen Faith; and Keep us in Faith. These things are the tools of the Holy Spirit and they have power, just like the Word of God had power at the beginning of the world when God said, “Let there be light” and there was light.

What’s more God gives that central part of the Means of Grace to you. He gives His Word to you, to speak to each other, to hear from each other to build one another up and help each other grow in faith. So what would happen if every Christian in our churches got this idea and decided to strengthen each other in this way? We’d have the Word of God constantly in our lives, filling our days. Things that trouble us might not seem so important. We might look at both problems and blessings differently. Unbelievers might listen in and end up coming to faith just like that. And all over the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod we would probably even “improve our pastors.” It could happen.