
FAN GOD'S GIFTS INTO FLAME

Theological Rationale for Developing a Plan for Growth in All Our God-given Callings

"Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress"

(1 Timothy 4:15)



FAN GOD'S GIFTS INTO FLAME!

THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE FOR DEVELOPING AN ANNUAL SPIRITUAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH PLAN¹

The Commemoration of St. Timothy, Pastor and Confessor
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INTRODUCTION

The writing of the initial draft² of this essay began on the day of the church year set aside to commemorate Timothy. As the seminary family gathered for worship in the midst of that day, these were the words of the second lesson and sermon text:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

²To Timothy, my dear son:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

³I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. ⁴Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. ⁶For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. ⁷For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1:1-7, NIV84)

I could not have asked for a better portion of Scripture to be read and proclaimed to me after months of reading and studying on the topic of this essay. The goal of this essay is the same as that which Paul articulates for Timothy in verse 6. After reminding Timothy and us of the foundational truth that our rock solid identity is *not* that of pastor but that of child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, Paul urges Timothy to “fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.” While we no longer have the promise of gifts imparted by the touch of an apostolic hand, it is still a lasting promise that “to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” (Ephesians 4:7).

¹ This essay is one part of a two-part package that also includes a workbook that provides four steps for called workers to work through as they develop a concrete growth plan for all their callings.

² Because of field testing and consulting with many others the reading and study and writing (and rewriting) of this essay and the accompanying workbook has stretched out over several years.

Christ gifts each of us uniquely according to his gracious measure, and he gives those gifts with a perfectly coordinated eternally planned-out purpose of serving in specific callings³ in his world. As the gracious Lord of his Church, he is also the one who is at work in the fact that we have been called to a particular place in public ministry. Behind all the human fingerprints, it is still the Bridegroom himself who brings us to a unique position of public ministry service to his cherished Bride. And parallel to the use of our gifts in our public ministry calling, the doctrine of vocation teaches us to ponder carefully how our Christ-measured-out gifts impact all our other callings God may have given us in life: husband, father, friend, etc. It is in all our God-given callings that we have the gracious privilege in Christ of being restored to the purpose Adam and Eve once had in the garden: being a tangible glimpse of a compassionate Creator to everyone he gives us to serve.

How important it is therefore for each of us – especially as those called to leadership in Christ’s church - to give careful and prayerful thought to three questions.

1. How has Christ in his gracious measuring of gifts uniquely gifted and wired me for service?
2. How does that unique gifting and wiring intersect with the unique settings of my public ministry calling and all my other God-given callings in life? And finally
3. How can I draw on the wisdom and insight of others to partner with me in pursuing growth in all my callings?

Yes, as those who live under the cross, we acknowledge our weaknesses as blessings through which God keeps us humble and mindful that we are by ourselves nothing but sinful jars of clay. We are worthy neither of a place in his kingdom nor of a position of leadership in that kingdom (2 Corinthians 4:7; 12:7). Yet that essential awareness of our weaknesses does not render our God-given strengths and our growth in them meaningless. It is still true that in the midst of all our God-given callings growth in our God-given strengths can prove a blessing beyond what we may ever fully grasp this side of heaven. It is no less important today than it was when Paul encouraged Timothy that we fan into flame whatever gifts we have been given so that “everyone can see our progress” (1 Timothy 4:15).

Especially in our calling to a position of leadership in public ministry, such evident growth is a powerful confession of the importance of the gospel’s cause. When other leaders in the kingdom and the souls we are called to serve see us growing in harnessing whatever talents we possess for the cause of the gospel, that is a tangible testimony to them all that the gospel matters more than anything. Such progress in our First Article gifts (“our mind and all our abilities” as Luther calls them) allows those gifts to be more and more fully put to work under the tutelage of the gospel as we accomplish what “God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

³ This essay is using calling – or its synonym vocation – in its broadest biblical sense. But at the heart of the doctrine of vocation is the reality that there is one CALLING that trumps every calling. All the other callings or vocations noted in this paragraph (calling in the broader sense) flow from this calling to faith (calling in the narrowest sense). Only being “in Christ” enables all our other callings to be the holy offerings of praise by those who are holy in Christ.

As we show progress in our unique gifts in our unique public ministry calling, as well as in all our other callings, we gain a glimpse of a wonder of God's grace. In all our callings God is at work to accomplish what he has "prepared in advance" for us to be doing during "all the days" that he wrote in his book even "before one of them came to be" (Psalm 139:16). God knew from all eternity the precise public ministry and royal priestly callings he would give you at this moment in salvation history. None of that was hidden from your Savior as he precisely – not haphazardly - measured out the gifts that would be important for those callings. Such planning and gifting of unique servants for unique places of service proclaim him the eternally perfect Master of the skill of equipping us where he calls us!

This essay has been designed to help us think theologically about such planning for growth. The accompanying workbook and its tools have been provided to give us some practical "here's some ways to do that" ideas as we ponder the intersection of our God-given gifts and our God-given places of service. I pray that the growth this package encourages proves a rich gift to the eternal souls he has called you to serve in your many callings in your home, to your calling body, and in God's world!

THINKING THEOLOGICALLY ABOUT THE BLESSINGS OF PLANNING FOR GROWTH

Part 1: Recognizing Some Frequent Growth Gaps

I have often been encouraged with how much growth activity is visible among those in public ministry. From my vantage point as director of continuing education at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, I have had the privilege of observing those who eagerly join in the new online classes that the seminary has offered. I have marveled at the ingenuity and determination displayed as new forms of digital technology are harnessed to allow public ministers to grow together. I have enjoyed observing the different ways pastoral circuits and pastoral conferences have set thoughtful and ambitious study agendas. There is much that gives a director of continuing education cause for thanksgiving.

Yet, some common gaps keep reappearing. The first commonly observed gap is that there is too often little organized thought given to a careful and objective evaluation of individual strengths and weaknesses. Even where such analysis of strengths and weaknesses may take place, the knowledge gain is too often not thoughtfully applied. There is little connection made between specific strengths and weaknesses and concrete and specific goals for growth that could benefit the specific challenges of ministry that confront the called worker in all their God-given callings. Failing to analyze gifts and abilities and how they might mesh still better with specific needs in specific callings can lead to pursuing growth without any focused direction.

That is said without downplaying in the least the wonderful growth – for public ministry callings in particular - that can and does occur when brothers gather for conferences and circuit meetings, or when smaller groups of pastors plan to study together, or when an individual pastor reads a book suggested by a ministry friend. Pastors have been – and still are - blessed with growth at such gatherings in our midst since the founding of our synod.

However, in the midst of all such good and useful growth activities, there may often be little intentional connection to that individual pastor's unique God-given strengths as he seeks to meet the unique challenges before him in all his callings.

It is a critical part of a pastor's growth to pursue growth in concert with others at regular circuit meetings or pastoral conferences, but along with growth in those more corporate venues there can be great benefit in pausing to plan for growth in ways that address his specific gifts and the specific needs of the unique set of God-given callings in which he serves. This essay is not seeking to exalt one way of growth over the other. The blessing of both/and trumps an either/or approach.

The other gap in growth activity frequently observed is that there is little assistance sought from others either in recognizing where specific growth might be the greatest blessing to a pastor's callings or in seeking ongoing encouragement to stay focused on pursuing that growth. Since it is categorically impossible to be objective when we are the subject, this often leaves blind spots unaddressed. Perhaps most debilitating of all, we may be squandering the more regular and focused encouragement that can come from brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.

The workbook that accompanies this essay offers some ideas for overcoming those specific gaps in how we pursue growth. There will be specific encouragement and direction given to plan for growth in all our callings on an annual basis ***with a focused analysis on personal spiritual gifts and specific challenges in our callings*** and to do this ***in close partnership with family, friends, lay leaders, and ministry peers***.

Part 2: Pondering Some Blessings That Empower Faith-Filled Planning

With all there is to gain from growth in our unique God-given gifts when applied to our unique callings in life, what is it that often hinders us from regularly devoting more time and attention to planning for growth? I know the objections that come up in my own heart. I've also had the opportunity to listen to the concerns and questions of others in the ministry during these last few years. This section of the essay seeks to answer those concerns by holding before us blessings from God that we can realize in the midst of careful planning for growth in concert with others. Remembering these gracious blessings of God can help us overcome specific barriers that may lead us to say "pass" when it comes to putting together a specific plan for growth. One by one we will trace the blessings that God can give in the midst of such careful planning for growth without ignoring the challenges that may lurk in the process.

BLESSING #1: PLANNING FOR GROWTH CAN BE A CONCRETE WAY TO TRUST IN GOD'S GOOD AND GRACIOUS WILL FOR OUR LIVES AND MINISTRIES.

Since God's truth is a narrow beam with sinful distortions lurking on either side, we will approach each of these blessings by first acknowledging the related distortions lurking nearby.

As we consider this first blessing that planning is an expression of trust in God's good and gracious will for our lives, a question may spring to life. Couldn't such planning for growth be evidence of a refusal to trust in that will of God?

The simple answer is, "Yes!" Ever since Satan convinced Adam and Eve that God could not be trusted in directing their lives, it is at the heart of our sinful nature to refuse to trust in God's will. Many passages warn us about this ever present danger. "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:34). We can become so anxious about the challenges of the next day, next week, next month, or next year that we indulge in faithless, frantic activity as if everything depends on us or become paralyzed by the burden of it all.

In the midst of planning we can also fail to recognize that God has promised us only daily bread: strength and wisdom to face the evils and troubles of each day as those days arrive. We overlook the blessings of today because we have become preoccupied with worry about the strength and wisdom needed for tomorrow.

What also complicates the issue is that our ability to forecast the future is much shakier than we may realize. (Just watch the seven day forecast on the evening news!) We can look ahead and make our plans thoughtless for what may be God's will in all of this. We can plan without taking into account the suddenness of how God can redirect our lives in an instant (always for the blessing of his children).

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will do this or that." As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. (James 4:13-16)

If we forget that there is so much we do not know about tomorrow, if we fail to realize how little we can see with our eyes the big picture of how God is blessing and preserving and growing us, then planning can become an exercise in what James calls evil boasting. Solomon's warning to the wise also still stands: "A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?" (Proverbs 20:24)

And there is even one more danger in planning that lurks here: we can fail to acknowledge humbly that it is a good thing that God has subjected this whole world to frustration (Romans 8:20). That frustration to which God has subjected a fallen creation is God's loving testimony that life in this sinful world can never again be our ultimate hope. If by our planning we begin to think that we can almost erase the curse of troubles coming our way or entering the life of our congregations (a subtle or not so subtle theology of glory), then we need to take to heart another inspired word of Solomon: "What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted" (Ecclesiastes 1:15).

It is critical that we heartily acknowledge that planning can become the opposite of trust. It can set us up in opposition to God's will if it is done apart from conscious trust in God. If it is done by a heart unwilling to bow in humility before the reality that God's plans (for his gracious purposes) as he reveals them day by day in our lives may be different from ours, then planning becomes an exercise in doubt, not faith. To plan, essentially, "against the LORD" is arrogant foolishness. "There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD. The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD" (Proverbs 21:30-31).

Are we ready to bow in humility to the truth that when some (or many) of our plans fail, that what happens "against" our plans may simply be God's good and gracious will moving forward for his purposes and our good? "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails" (Proverbs 19:21). How important to realize that Solomon is not suggesting that God's overruling of our plans is a problem for the believer. Since the plans of the God who has redeemed us in his eternal Son are always plans to prosper us and not to harm us (Jeremiah 29:11), then God's overruling of our plans is another reason for thanksgiving.

Yet none of these concerns changes the reality that planning can indeed be trust put into visible, concrete action. It can be the trust of faith that recognizes that God's usual path for accomplishing his will in and through our callings is by using as his agents those who believe in him. It is the wonderful and awesome theological truth that systematic theologians have called the distinction between *prima causa* and *secundae causae*.

God is always the first cause (*prima causa*) of everything. We cannot move a finger apart from the One in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Yet God has so ordered his world that he honors us to be his masks (*secundae causae*) as we use our "mind and all our abilities" as his earthly tools. That is how he typically works whether it is for the purpose of putting bread on our family's table or the bread of life before our parishioners and prospects. This is the awesome truth at work behind the doctrine of vocation. God's basic *modus operandi* in his caring for his world is to work through us as we carry out in faith the vocations he has given us. Some in the psychological world speak of people remembering that they have *agency – under God* the plans and decisions we make in life do matter. God has so ordained it.

If we neglect the truth of God as *prima causa* working through us as *secundae causae* we can quickly grow proud and arrogant with all "we" accomplish (or fearful and despairing about all we are not accomplishing – it's a roller coaster existence!). But if we neglect the truth that we are God's masks who are called to work as *secundae causae* in his grand created design, we easily grow careless and lazy and live almost as if we were fatalists. The dangers of planning lie in the former misunderstanding. The blessings of planning help us avoid the latter!

As long as we remember in faith that there are no plans that succeed apart from God's will, and as long as we realize how thankful we can be that his good and gracious will is being done even without our plans⁴, then our planning can indeed be an exercise of faith. We look at how God has fearfully and wonderfully made us. We look at how he even more gloriously called us to faith. We consider, grace upon grace, that he has entrusted us with opportunities to serve as his masks both

⁴ Doubtless some of the greatest growth throughout our lives happens as God blesses the seemingly small events and activities of our lives that either wouldn't register in our planning or that we never could have foreseen. God wastes nothing in our lives!

in public ministry and royal priestly callings. Then, we dedicate ourselves to pondering prayerfully how we can under his grace be masks that more transparently reflect his goodness in how we carry out our God-given responsibilities. It is such a faith-filled foundation for planning that underlies the truth of Proverbs 21:5: “The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.”

Such passages lead us back to James 4 to note carefully that James was not warning us away from any thought about planning. Rather, James is merely rejecting arrogant planning that failed to acknowledge that our plans are made not as masters of our existence but as those who live as servants under a gracious God. He doesn’t want our statement of “God-willing” (*deo volente*) to become little more than a pious slogan mouthed with little meaning as we set our minds to “do our own thing.” Rather, he is warning us so that our “God-willing” is the conviction of those who plan under the will of him who has loved us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3).

Here’s the bottom line: God’s promise to bless us according to his will doesn’t rule out godly planning, rather, it simply means we plan in faith, not fear. We don’t plan in fear as if tomorrow (for us individually or for us corporately as God’s Church) would be chaos if we didn’t plan. Instead, we plan in faith trusting that he who controls all things delights to bless the plans of his believing children. We plan, even as we know he may modify those plans to bless us even more than we could ever have imagined!

Blessing #2: Planning for growth honors God by taking seriously that gifts were given to bring him honor and glory to his saving name as we use those gifts in our callings.

When it comes to this blessing of planning, the objection that at times gets in the way sounds like this: “Couldn’t such planning for growth be a launching pad for the kind of self-centered, self-promotion that is behind the competitive ‘who’s #1’ spirit so evident in the world?”

Again, the simple answer is, “Yes.” Even a cursory glance through the gospels finds the apostles regularly returning to their favorite topic for debate: which one of them was the greatest. It doesn’t take much to spot that same spirit at work as John reported that they had put a stop to unauthorized driving out of demons by the man who was not “one of us” (Mark 9:38). How stunned John must have been when, expecting commendation for protecting the exclusive rights of the Twelve, Jesus rebuked him for his ignorance and proceeded to warn all of them about the danger of causing offense!

We expect such a spirit of competition in the unbelieving world. Unable to find their identity solely in being loved and redeemed children of God through Jesus, the world is forever seeking to establish its identity by excelling others in outward success, wealth, and achievements. They are looking for that which sets them apart from others around them and on which they can take pride. Because our own sinful nature refuses to take comfort in our identity in Jesus, we too can easily import this spirit of proud competition into the church. Public ministers are by no means immune to the “my ministry faithfulness trumps yours” type of argument. This can lead us to adopt a

subtle theology of glory that refuses to talk about our weaknesses and that only wants others to see our strengths. We can begin to forget Paul's maxim that it is when we are weak that we are strong (2 Corinthians 12:10). Our sinful nature can run wild in planning if the focus seems to be, "Look at me! Look how gifted I am. Look at what I have achieved. Clearly my church should be happy to have me!" How sobering then to remember that the rich young ruler, so "capable" and apparently having it "all together" (how many Jewish mothers hoped he would be their daughter's husband?), was in reality not even within the kingdom at all! (Mark 10:17)

But even though making plans for growth can indeed become a platform for sinful pride, it is also true that this real danger can be distorted into a pious sounding smokescreen to conceal less than sanctified reasons for avoiding all planning for growth.

First, we can make fine sounding arguments that we are not planning because we don't want to follow a personal theology of glory, yet it is entirely possible that our sinful nature could be hiding its own laziness behind that smokescreen. Our sinful nature may be very comfortable with the status quo and doesn't want to go through the pain that comes from learning and growing beyond ingrained habits and mindless routine. It can be very ego deflating to admit that there may be better ways to carry out our God-given callings rather than following the comfortable ruts we have established.

Where our own natural heart's laziness is behind our failure to plan, then we are in danger of becoming like those about whom Luther warns in his preface to the Large Catechism.

Everything that they [many preachers and pastors] are to preach and teach is now so very clearly and easily presented in so many salutary books, which truly deliver what the other manuals promised in their titles: "Sermons That Preach Themselves," "Sleep Soundly," "Be Prepared," and "Thesaurus." Yet, they are not upright and honest enough to buy such books, or, if they have them already, to consult or read them. Oh, these shameful gluttons and servants of their bellies are better suited to be swineherds and keepers of dogs than guardians of souls and pastors. (Preface to the Large Catechism, Kolb-Wengert, 379).

Secondly, it is not just laziness that can hide behind our failure to plan. At times the enemy may be deep discouragement in life and ministry. Having banged our heads against the challenges of our callings for so long we can begin to conclude in our heart of hearts that nothing will ever change anyway. Once again, we may even distort the theology of the cross to assure us that such pessimistic discouragement is part of our theology.

But allowing such discouragement to grab hold of us is in direct contradiction to Paul's words to every Christian at the end of his great resurrection chapter. "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). While it is certainly a lie of the devil that we can by some extraordinary effort bring the kingdom of heaven visibly to earth, it

is an equally deceitful lie of the devil that all efforts at growth and change in the kingdom are nothing but love's labor lost.

Thirdly, what can also be hiding behind our reticence to plan for growth is a self-centered fear of looking bad in front of others. Why stretch for growth when we may only fail and put our weaknesses on display for all to see? Two errors are being made then simultaneously. First, as we defensively seek to keep our weaknesses hidden away, we fail to realize how much others are able to see through such flimsy facades. Secondly, why would those whose hope is in the grace of God be so afraid of failure or admitting weakness? The blood of Christ covers every weakness that may be revealed and puts God's seal of blessing on even that which we might label as failure!

Finally, lurking behind a failure to plan for the sake of avoiding self-aggrandizing pride may actually be evidence that we are working with a distorted definition of humility. Humility does **not** mean denying that we have all been given a unique package of gifts to put to use wisely and well in all our God-given callings. True humility thankfully acknowledges the gracious reality that "to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). Humility is not a denial that gifts have been received. Humility, rather, remembers that they are all *gifts* of grace. "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Corinthians 4:7)

So what is the key to walking the tightrope? How do we avoid pride that plans for the sake of personal recognition while at the same time rejecting the laziness or discouragement or defensiveness or false humility that does not even bother to plan? Isn't it remembering that the whole purpose for growth is **not** about us?

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:10-11).

Just as Luther repeatedly reminded us that our good works are not for our benefit (as if we had something to prove to God to gain his love), but for our neighbor's benefit, so too developing the use of our gifts more and more year after year is not about finding our way onto the "top ten most effective WELS pastors" list. How foolish that would be! We all already possess before our Father the record of the most faithful Shepherd of souls. We were clothed with that already in our baptism! Instead of being about us, growth is about excelling more and more in serving that gracious Christ and those he has entrusted or still may entrust to our care. It is about the cause of the gospel. It is about being sharpened tools of God's compassion in all our callings so that he may be praised through Jesus Christ. God doesn't ask us to prove anything to him by our growth, but he does position us in our unique callings so as to be proofs of the wonder of his grace in our royal priestly and public ministry service. Planning to use our gifts takes seriously that gifts were given

to us to bring honor to his saving name. To plan for growth with such a Christ-centered focus is to act in faith that God does wish to bless his world and, in particular, his church, through the gifts he has given us.

Blessing #3: Planning for growth done in intentional concert with others reaps the blessing of stronger partnerships with others in the body of Christ.

As we consider the blessing of partnering with others in the pursuit of growth, here the objection, especially in our public ministry callings, is often worded this way: “Won’t asking for others to help us assess how we are doing in using our gifts just open the door to unjust criticism and unjust judging of spiritual ministry by faulty human standards?”

Once again, the answer is “Yes, it could!” Paul identifies that very challenge in 1 Corinthians 4:1-4.

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

The Corinthians, who were the first recipients of these inspired words, were far too enamored with human wisdom and human eloquence. In their supposed maturity (which was nothing but spiritual immaturity) they were finding fault with Paul – and other spiritual leaders as well – in ways that were foolish and unjust. Their criteria for judging Paul and his ministry were not faithful use of gifts given in service of the true wisdom (the gospel). They failed to take into consideration that judging those who have been entrusted with “the secret things of God” by the world’s standards can lead to the foolish judgment of “unfaithful” when someone is indeed being “faithful” in their calling.

Solomon reminds us that “lips that speak with wisdom are a rare jewel” (Proverbs 20:15) and there has been no sudden discovery of any jewel mine of wise lips since Solomon’s day. The warning applies especially when evaluating spiritual leadership in the kingdom of God that we must “stay away from a foolish man for you will not find knowledge on his lips” (Proverbs 14:7). Many who have been quick to thoughtlessly judge their called workers by their own self-chosen standards would do well to remember what Jesus warned in Matthew 12:36: “But I tell you that men will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.”

Yet we forfeit far, far too much of the blessing of being a part of the body of Christ if we allow the abuses of faulty human judgments to rob us of the wise counsel God can give us through spiritually mature family members, friends, ministry peers and lay leaders. Here, too, the example of our head, our Lord Jesus, proves instructive. In his state of humbling himself, he often sought the support of those closest to him. While they may often have proved to be overmatched by the task – consider the sleepiness of Gethsemane – yet the fact that they might not carry out that support perfectly did not prevent Jesus from seeking it. Even in Jesus’ state of exaltation, while as true God and man he needs no advice from us to rule his kingdom and his world, yet our King still

invites the prayers of his people and takes those prayers into account in how he guides his Church and rules his world.⁵

If the perfect Savior treasured the support and partnership of his brothers and sisters, where does that leave us who can make no claim for having reached the perfection of heaven in how we live and serve in his kingdom according to our gifts and callings? To deny that every part of the body of Christ needs the support and encouragement of every other part of the body would be to deny the very purpose for which Jesus gave the public ministry. We dare not, under the pretext of protecting the public ministry from worldly judging, provide a safe umbrella for our pride. We who serve in the public ministry are not somehow the great exception to needing the support and wisdom and prayers of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We must not distort the truth that we are entrusted with the secret things of God into a barrier behind which we hide from the spiritually wise feedback that can come from mature brothers and sisters in the faith.

Such hiding, while outwardly seeming to protect the gospel's cause, actually can prove detrimental to it. At the risk of repeating a point made earlier, if we as public ministers think that we can successfully conceal our weaknesses and shortcomings, the danger is that we only fool ourselves. Or even if we are perhaps temporarily able to hide our weaknesses from the sight of those we are called to serve, that only increases the likelihood of greater offense when perhaps a sudden and even ministry threatening revelation of our personal and ministerial weaknesses makes them glaringly obvious. Jesus' words from Luke 8:17 deserve to be pondered also by those in public ministry: "There is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open." By God's own design, there is no place to hide in the ministry. And woe to us – and the souls in our care – if we try! Solomon understood that long ago, "Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Proverbs 26:12).

Instead, it is the epitome of Spirit-given wisdom to acknowledge where we are poor in spirit and that we will always struggle to grasp how to carry out all our callings faithfully. Certainly we confess that first and foremost to God. However, just as we are God's answer to others in bringing God's rebuke and encouragement to them in order that they can find help and hope in the midst of those struggles, so too God can strengthen us through the rebuke and encouragement we receive from others. The mutual comfort and encouragement that takes place in the body of Christ does not find an exception in the one who holds the pastoral office.⁶ Luther was not excluding pastors when in the Smalcald Articles he spoke of the blessing of "the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters" (Kolb Wengert, 319).

⁵ One brother in ministry, as he read an initial draft of this essay, added this comment here: "This is such a wonder to me every time I think about it. If he already knows all things, has planned for all things, and knows the best way to handle all things, how could my prayers in any way match his wisdom? Yet, he invites me to offer them and still takes them into account. Grace upon grace!"

⁶ In keeping what was said above, there is certainly an important element of pastoral wisdom in knowing with whom to seek such support and where we might be placing a burden on a brother or sister in Christ that would prove a stumbling block to them. But to rule out that there are lay leaders and ministry peers with whom we can have such honest conversations about our struggles is to wall ourselves off from the very support that *every* member of the body of Christ, including the pastor, needs to remain spiritually healthy.

Please understand why that “mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters is such an important gift of God. There is no one harder for me to speak the law to than myself. My excuses and rationalizations for my actions are legion. “All a man’s ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD” (Proverbs 16:2) God often does use brothers and sisters in Christ as his tool to weigh the motives of our own hearts.

Conversely, there is no one harder for me to comfort with the gospel than myself. Especially as those who seek to serve faithfully in the public ministry, we can be painfully aware of how important our calling is and in what innumerable ways we have shown ourselves unfaithful on a daily, if not hourly, basis. How wonderful can be the words of forgiveness and encouragement from those who, like Jonathan for David, help us find strength in the LORD.

But doesn’t it dishonor the gospel if it becomes evident to those we serve that we who preach and teach the gospel have not yet perfectly applied it to our own hearts and lives? Not necessarily. In fact, what truly dishonors the gospel is acting as if we in public ministry have somehow grown beyond the need this side of heaven to receive from others the rebuke of the law and the comfort of the gospel. We cannot be afraid of acknowledging concrete evidence in our own lives and ministry that we too live by grace alone. To deny that reality would foolishly lend our aid to those in the church who build unbiblically high pedestals for their public ministers – pedestals from which we can all easily fall and break our necks. Here too we find the wisdom of John the Baptist’s words: “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30).

And one more note about the blessing of seeking honest support and encouragement from brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. Remember the danger of the Rehoboam syndrome (1 Kings 12)! There is always the temptation to surround ourselves only with those who will offer us the counsel we want. We can look for those who will not question the wisdom of our plans no matter how shaky those plans may be. We may long for those who leave the insecurities of our weaknesses untouched and who refuse to show us our blind spots. That can all be very comforting and pride stroking – and useless. “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (Proverbs 27:6). Or again, “He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue” (Proverbs 28:23). Willfully blind mutual admiration societies may do wonders for proud “self-esteem,” but they do little to advance the cause of the kingdom. “Kings take pleasure in honest lips; they value a man who speaks the truth” (Proverbs 16:13).

This encouragement to find the blessing of the body of Christ includes seeking more than one or two advisors. “For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure” (Proverbs 11:14). Just in case we might be tempted to draw the line at seeking such counsel only from public ministry peers, Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians (yes, the same book that warns of foolish human judging!) urge us to recognize the blessing we can reap from multiple parts of the body. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you.’” (1 Corinthians 12:21). What is more, that wise counsel knows no gender barriers. In speaking of the wife of noble character (literally: a strong woman), Solomon adds this description, “She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue” (Proverbs 31:26). While we certainly are more than wise to honor the unique callings of head and helper that God has established in his kingdom, such unique callings were never meant to hinder the sharing of wise counsel even from helper to head. It can be done with the greatest respect. It can be received with the greatest blessing.

Blessing #4: Planning for growth is an exercise in gospel freedom by which we partner to hold up high the God-given honor of the public ministry.

This blessing responds to this concern expressed about planning for growth: “Isn’t it a form of legalism to develop a synod-wide system that compels all pastors to plan for growth?”

The simple answer is again, “Yes, it could be!” There is no command of God that states, “Thou shalt annually lay before the feet of thy circuit pastor a detailed plan for spiritual and professional growth.” Such a forced march toward growth would be evidence that those who have been called to urge continuing education in our synod have grown frustrated with the slow pace of gospel encouragement. Are they now relying on laying down the law to accomplish what that gospel encouragement couldn’t seem to accomplish?

And yes, pastors could approach such a synod-wide “mandate” as just so many hoops to jump through to keep the circuit pastor or district president (or director of **Grow in Grace**) happy by seeming to play along with their silly little game. Such “hoop jumping” would benefit no one – least of all the eternal souls we serve in all our callings.

But isn’t there another way to view this? Can’t all of this simply be another example of what in gospel freedom we agree to do together so as to uphold high standards for those serving in public ministry? Could it be that annual growth plans are essentially no different than the standards we have agreed to uphold for what we expect *before* someone is presented as eligible for a call? For those pursuing the pastoral ministry, there is obviously no biblical requirement that working for four years to earn a bachelor of arts degree must be followed by three academic years and one vicar year in pursuit of a master of divinity degree. Where is it written that this is the only divinely ordained path to being declared *candidatum reverendi ministerii*? But, together, for the sake of gospel ministry, we have agreed that for most candidates for public ministry such pre-ministerial standards honor the gospel and prepare men to begin their service in the pastoral ministry as well-equipped shepherds of souls.

Could it be that agreeing to put together a regular plan for growth is the same concept of upholding high standards for the public ministry *after* graduation that our pre-ministerial training provides for us *before* graduation? Instead of merely agreeing on a path for growth for potential called workers for 4, 8, or 12 years, can we not also agree on ways that could help us toward growth for forty or fifty years? The students in our ministerial education schools have no eternal souls entrusted to their care in the public ministry. We may have hundreds or even thousands entrusted to our care. Might not that make it even more important to consider the wisdom of some form of post-graduation pattern for how we might encourage each other in growth?

So much of what we agree to do together in carrying out the work of our synod are just such agreements to do things a particular way (that admittedly, could be done a different way) for the sake of carrying out the work of the gospel as wisely and well as possible. To call any or all of this in and of itself legalism is to tear to shreds many of our long-cherished paths by which we seek to do the Lord’s work decently and in order. To urge each called worker to do whatever they see fit

in their own eyes when it comes to ministry-long growth may seem to guard against legalism. However, all it may accomplish is blocking useful structures from developing among us that can help us all be better encouragers to one another for the sake of the gospel. To cry “legalism” may reveal more about the hidden motives of my natural, sinful heart than any inherent weakness of the initiative that drew my criticism.

Please allow me to add a very personal comment. It has been my concern all along in working with others to design this encouragement and the patterns being proposed with it, that we not substitute law for gospel as that on which we ultimately rely to compel us towards growth. My concern has been to guard the rich variety of ways that called workers can grow that fit the different varieties of gifts that Jesus gives to each of us and the different ministry settings to which he calls us through his Church. Since God has not ordained any one way to plan for growth, I am willing to grant that there will **always** be considerable room for improvement in such a proposed process in order to provide safeguards against legalism and mindless conformity to a humanly devised process. The goal is not to produce empty growth activity that looks good only in official reports. I pray for the humility to be ready to listen to truth-spoken-in-love suggestions that could make all this a better tool for real growth for all of us in all our callings.

But know this: it is not legalism to set up ways that open up opportunities to provide any of us as called workers with a fitting rebuke, lovingly spoken, whenever we are in danger of imitating Luther’s swineherds rather than Christ’s under-shepherds. Since much more has been entrusted to us, and much more will be demanded of us (Luke 12:48), it can be argued that public ministers stand in the greatest need of a robust system for such checks and balances on our service. God has entrusted eternal souls into our care. Those who know the grace of Christ have nothing to fear from honest rebuke. We have nothing to fear since no accurate rebuke will ever reveal anything that has not been answered long ago in the perfect life and innocent death of our Lord Jesus. We stand on grace even when we evaluate our service in our callings. We are not evaluating our identity in Jesus. Instead, as we contemplate the glory of his grace, we are only considering how we might more clearly reflect that glory in all the places we serve as his masks (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Nor is it legalism to set up ways that provide public ministers with more regular opportunities to hear that gospel spoken to us by others within the body of Christ. It is so easy in public ministry to preach grace but to live driven by the law. The more opportunity we have for others to speak God’s grace to our hearts – and to our ministries – the better for our souls and our ministries!

CONCLUSION

For those for whom planning for growth may not be a familiar practice, all this may seem overwhelming. Yet just imagine that almost every pastor in our synod paused for a day each year:

- 1) to give thanks to God for unique blessings in his life and in his unique God-given callings during the previous year;

- 2) to evaluate – under the protective umbrella of God’s grace in Jesus and with the help of trusted brothers and sisters - how he is doing in all his God-given callings;
- 3) to build from that review and evaluation a grace-focused plan for growth in faith and all his callings; and
- 4) to partner with a few especially trusted royal priestly and public ministry partners to find God’s strength to carry out that plan.

What might be the impact if this would become as much a part of our annual routine as spending a day or two attending a district convention or called worker conference?⁷

It is my conviction that such a practice, should it become a thoughtful regular practice⁸ in our midst, could be used by God to have an impact for the cause of the gospel that could make legions of angels give thanks. If the kind of structured plan for growth that is routinely a part of our pre-ministerial preparation became a ministry-long practice for those in the public ministry, I don’t believe anyone could estimate the harvest of blessings God might produce through this for each of us individually and all of us corporately.

I know this process will mean an expense of time and effort. But it is my conviction that this is more than worth the effort. And why is that? This is not about our glory or a bottom line that impacts only a corporate profit and loss sheet. This is about a gospel-empowered bottom line that impacts eternal souls, ours and those we serve (1 Timothy 4:16). We have a far greater and more long-lasting purpose for our efforts toward growth than does corporate America. Why not put them to shame with the shrewd quality of our planning and the faithful executing of our plans? Why not learn from Jesus’ parable and show ourselves as children of light to be at least as wise as the people of this world (Luke 16:8)? Take God at his promises! The Savior who loves you beyond comprehension has measured gifts into your life to equip you for all your callings. Fan God’s gifts into flame!

⁷ A lay leader, whose spiritual wisdom I have learned to treasure, wrote this as he reviewed this essay’s encouragement to ministers of the gospel to plan for growth in all their callings: “Festival services are planned to edify the worshippers and give high glory to the Trinity. Time for weekly worship and daily devotion as well as regular prayer are planned into our lives. Wedding and funeral services are planned to provide honor to God, offer tasteful worship and support those gathered in attendance. I think you get where I’m taking this. We spend a lot of time in our earthly lives planning to honor God, but also for the benefit of others. From a society standpoint, we plan Thanksgiving dinner (where and when), vacations (what, when, how long, where) and even our daily meals. Aside from the [cautions] you explicitly described in the essay, why wouldn’t an individual take time to plan for himself as a routine, because we are assured God will bless it and it will enhance the spiritual life of himself and others within his circle of influence. To me there is so much upside to it, it would be exciting to look at this annual opportunity.”

⁸ Nothing in the kingdom of God is so good that it cannot be defiled by the careless and mindless formalism by which our sinful nature distorts anything no matter how godly and pious it might be. This author wants to be the first to admit that all of this can become nothing but corporate hoop jumping if we allow it to be so!