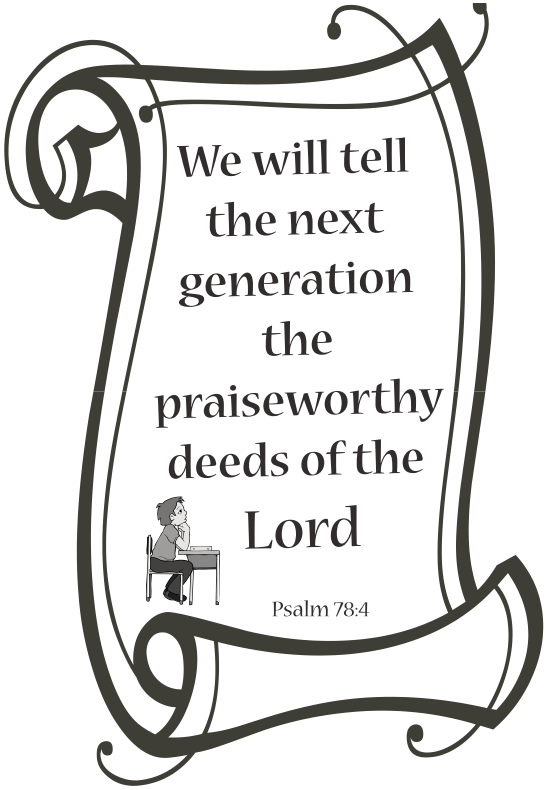
THE LUTHERAN EDUCATOR



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Maintaining the Status Quo

In his book, *Sixteen Trends…Their Profound Impact on Our Future*, Gary Marx identifies the need for continuous improvement. He contends that continuous improvement will replace quick fixes and defense of the status quo. The first step toward improvement would involve developing a process for such improvement while incorporating quality and continuous improvement into the classroom. Imagine the power of all involved in education – parents, stakeholders, educators, and students – examining continuous improvement.

Educational reform is a newsworthy topic. State test results are reported by local television stations and published in newspapers across the United States. No Child Left Behind sets as its goal educational accountability and high achievement for all. Some would contend that the outcome of this legislation has become a quick fix – teach to the test. The National Education Association states that the number of states not meeting their annual yearly performance goals has tripled or quadrupled since testing began. All involved in education feel the pressure to perform as high-stakes accountability comes into place. Continuous improvement is difficult to achieve with this model of education and assessment. Some might be searching for the quick fix as schools attempt to purchase one exact curriculum that will solve their educational needs. A one-size-fits-all approach to education does not foster improvement because it disregards the fact that each learner is unique.

The suggestion of improvement may cause discomfort among some educators. Thoughts go to a person of authority, clipboard in hand, seated unobtrusively in the back of the classroom, observing one's teaching and offering constructive feedback. Research from the University of Georgia makes an interesting point about this strategy for improvement. 25% of teachers implemented suggestions from their supervisors while 18% of the people observed did the opposite of what was suggested. That leaves more than half, 57% who did nothing to change. Continuous improvement demands much more than that. Change begins with an individual and needs to be in place before school-wide advances can be made. Individual teachers need to reflect on their practice and adapt as needed to meet the increasing demands of learners.

Most people find it difficult to embrace change. How do we view the process of improvement in our WELS schools? A quick look at statistics can cause one to question defense of the status quo as we see a downward trend in Lutheran elementary school enrollment. Rather than reacting in alarm or becoming defensive, might we use these statistics as a catalyst to seek ways to improve our educational system? Continuous improvement needs to be considered to insure that our school system offers high-quality Christian education for all those we serve.

CAL

The Bond of Love

John R. Schultz

A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. John 13:34-35

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy, because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now. Philippians 1:3-5

"I love you," is a common English word in a common expression. I may say it to my mother, brother, friend, or sweetheart. One English word, yet used for different reasons. The Greeks used various words to distinguish the different kinds of love. I may *storge* my brother, *philia* my friend, or *eros* my sweetheart. Jesus commands his disciples to love one another. The Greek word used in this case is *agape. Agape* is used 116 *times* in the New Testament scriptures. It is a love that gives, irrespective of thought of return or the merit of the recipient

In a sense Jesus' command is an old one: "*Love your neighbor as yourself,*" Leviticus 19:18. But to Jesus' followers it was new because it was to be a distinguishing characteristic of their discipleship. They were to be united in a bond of loving fellowship because Jesus first loved them. He demonstrated his *agape* for them through his innocent suffering and horrible death on Calvary's cross.

How the Apostle Paul loved the congregation at Philippi! In thankfulness to God he remembered the love of individuals and the congregation. Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth, opened her heart to the Gospel Paul preached and invited him to her home. It filled Paul with joy as he remembered the jailer's response to the Gospel and his family's baptism. Paul could pray with joy as he remembers the congregation's Gospel-motivated support and aid to him as he was in prison. There was a mutual bond of loving fellowship between Paul and the Philippians because of the Gospel.

The Gospel is a foundational message of love. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,"* John 3:16. God is in love with us. He sent his Son to pay the price for our sins. he announces to us in Word and Sacrament: You are forgiven; you are loved.

That message cements us, Christ's disciples, together. There is a God-given bond of love we call Christian fellowship. It is there because of Christ's great love for us. Our common *agape* for each other is a mark of our discipleship.

How does this fit together with Christian education? The principal thanks God every time he remembers his student body. He rejoices over faithfulness, friendliness and positiveness. He attempts to create with his students and faculty a Christian partnership in the Gospel. The teachers will recognize and strive to establish with their students a bond of respect, love and joy. The students will experience the bond of fellowship through the Gospel. Philia will be encouraged. *Agape* will be lived.

Moved by the Gospel, the principal sees students and faculty through the eyes of the Gospel—even when the Law must be applied. Moved by the Gospel, the teachers see their students through the eyes of the Gospel as they strive to equip them as life-long disciples of Christ. Moved by the Gospel, the students see each other through the eyes of the Gospel and love and respect each other and their teachers.

Jesus said, *"Love one another."*

Read some more: I John 4:7-11

Prayer:

Bless be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.
Before our Father's throne
We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one,
Our comforts and our cares.
We share our mutual woes,
Our mutual burdens bear,
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.

John Schultz served as principal/administrator of Minnesota Valley Luther High School, New Ulm, MN. He is currently retired and living in New Ulm, MN.

Easter Hymn

Death and darkness, get you packing,
Nothing now to man is lacking,
All your triumphs now are ended,
And what Adam marred is mended;
Graves are beds now for the weary,
Death a nap, to wake more merry;
Youth now, full of pious duty,
Seeks in thee for perfect beauty,
The weak, and aged tired, with length
Of days, from thee look for new strength,
And infants with thy pangs contest
As pleasant, as if with the breast;
Then, unto him, who thus hath thrown
Even to contempt thy kingdom down,
And by his blood did us advance
Unto his own inheritance,
To him be glory, power, praise,
From this, unto the last of days.

Henry Vaughan
(1622-1695)

School Violence Prevention and WELS Schools

Cynthia Lange

The Columbine massacre in 1999 was not the first violent act committed at a school nor was it the first incident involving students being shot on a school campus. However, its shocking ferocity seemed to provide a watershed moment that galvanized law enforcement and school agencies into systematically improving school safety. Currently, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires schools to have a safety plan in place. However, since Columbine and NCLB there have been numerous high-profile acts of violence committed on school campuses across the country. In light of these violent acts, most notably shootings, educators and parents alike might well ask: Are these safety measures working?

The scope and length of this paper is quite limited when compared to the considerable information available concerning school violence and the means for its prevention. The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of violence prevention methods and suggest measures or practices that may prove useful in WELS schools.

Violence

Violence is often defined as the "exertion of physical force so as to injure and abuse" (Merriam-Webster). But, violence may also be defined broadly as "injury by or as if by distortion, infringement, or profanity," "intense, turbulent, or furious and often destructive action or force," or "vehement feeling or expression" (Merriam-Webster). This broad definition encompasses the student behaviors with which most teachers must contend such as: cursing, grabbing, pushing, verbal threats, and intimidation (Scott, Nelson, & Liaupsin, 2001).

According to the statistics available from the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, most students are more likely to encounter violence when they are away from school rather than at school. School violence including "assaults with or without weapons, physical fights, bullying, gang violence, rape, sexual assault, and robbery" has been on the decline since 1992. These statistics are encouraging and imply that

the various strategies used in different schools are working. However, some schools remain more dangerous than others and many students are impacted by school violence on a regular basis (Bucher & Manning, 2003). Therefore, various public and private agencies continue to offer safety plans, programs, and support to educators as they strive to create safe learning environments.

Safety in action

Many experts point to three broad but crucial areas that must be addressed in making schools safe. These areas are school management, school curriculum, and the physical environment of the school. (National Education Association: Safe Schools Manual).

School management includes policies and standards put in place by an individual school's administration as well as by that school's district. These policies should include a written mission statement that addresses, among other issues, school safety; student and staff behaviors; a disciplinary code; and finally, such issues as an open vs. closed campus, student participation in safety procedures, and possible alternative educational environments. It must be said that once these policies are in place they will be effective only to the extent that teachers use them and administrators enforce them.

Schools must determine through what curriculum they will instill in students the values and norms that will lead to appropriate behavior in school as well as in their families and communities. Instilling the appropriate violence reducing behaviors into students is a crucial part of violence control and safety at school. Programs often integrated into a written curriculum may include conflict resolution, diversity, drug education, anger management, multicultural education, peer mediation, sexual harassment, bullying (awareness and prevention), and gang (participation) prevention. The definition of curriculum might also be expanded to include not only prevention programs, but solid teaching practices and methodologies in core subjects. Research indicates that students who are successful in school are less likely to engage in, or become victims of violence at school. (Scott, Nelson & Liaupsin, 2001; Greenberg, O'Brian, Zins, Resnick & Elias, 2003).

Unless a school has been recently built with security in mind, working to improve the physical environment of the school building and campus is a large but crucial undertaking. Safety improvements vary widely depending upon the size and type of the community, the school's location, the size and ethnicity of the student population, school size, and the grade levels housed in the school. Options to secure the school's physical plant may include, but are not limited to, attractive building and grounds, school uniforms, visible adults in the building and at entry points, security cameras, lighting, metal detectors, the elimination of lockers, ID cards for staff and students, campus security personnel, limited entry points, and biometric identification devices.

In addition to addressing the school's management, curriculum, and environment, it is essential that the school's administrator(s), or district, develop and put into place a crisis management plan. Basically, this plan must clearly state who does what with whom in the event of an emergency. Many experts suggest that a crisis management plan address these issues: communication, facilitation, and counseling. Communication would include plans to communicate with parents, staff, students, and in certain situations, law enforcement agencies, the community and the media during and after a crisis. The facilitation section of the plan outlines who helps and stays with whom in the event of an emergency. The school administration must also plan what types of counseling services might be necessary for students and staff after a crisis and how they plan to make these services available (National Education Association: Safe Schools Manual).

Safety for WELS schools:

There are some people who still question the need for safety procedures and plans in WELS schools. Many parents will tell you they are sending their children to WELS schools because they are, among other things, safe. Others will point out that parochial schools are not bound by federal rulings such as NCLB. So why should WELS schools, especially small schools in "nice" neighborhoods, be concerned with safety measures?

First, although we are not bound by federal rulings and public school educational practices, WELS educators do want to engage in best practices for their students. We also want to demonstrate to our parents that we are aware of, and put into practice, programs and methods that will benefit their children without compromising their Lutheran education. Second, it is unwise for any teacher to stick her head in the sand and assume nothing will ever happen in her school. The shooting of 2006 in a rural, one-room Amish school in Pennsylvania demonstrated that even being located in a "nice" rural area provides no guarantee of shelter from violence. And finally, WELS teachers know from their study of scripture that each of us [are] "sinful from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5) and "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21, RSV). We are sinful beings living in a sinful vale of tears. Violence in some form is inevitable. WELS teachers must use what God has made available to them through secular means and through scripture to provide a reasonable measure of safety for their students.

WELS teachers also have a clear directive and motivation for preventing violence in their schools: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 19:19). Their wish to make disciples and proclaim the Savior provides an atmosphere of caring. The Law and Gospel provide the underlying blueprint for the implementation of safety programs.

The exact procedures used to prevent violence and provide a safe learning environment will vary from school to

school in the WELS as it does in public schools. Just as with other issues in education, safety procedures are not a one size fits all proposition. The unique variables associated with each school will dictate the best course of safety prevention in relation to the school's physical plant and student population.

Some practical procedures that many WELS schools may wish to implement might include: limited entry points into the building; good indoor and outdoor lighting; finger printing of faculty and school personnel (this is now required in Michigan); and clean, well cared for buildings and grounds. Procedures such as security cameras at entry points, parking lots, secluded outdoor areas, and hallways; ID tags for staff and/or students; uniforms; biometric identification devices; and security personnel might be useful for certain WELS schools but wouldn't be necessary or appropriate for many others.

An available violence prevention tool already in place at WELS schools is sound teaching. WELS schools are known for solid, best practice instructional methods and above average student achievement. As mentioned earlier, research strongly suggests that students who do well in school are less likely to be involved with violence at school. This gives WELS schools another advantage in preventing school violence.

Research indicates that children who come from violent homes are more likely to be violent at school (Boulter, 2004). Undoubtedly there are some children attending WELS schools who come from violent homes. But again, teachers in WELS schools have an advantage when working with these children and their parents to resolve safety issues. We can use God's powerful Word when counseling them. In many cases we can also refer these families to Christian professionals who are trained to help them through their issues while using God's word and a biblical perspective.

There are certain safety measures that are necessary and critical for every WELS school. All WELS schools should publish their mission, purpose, and policies. Discipline policies must be clearly spelled out and enforced using Christian love. Every WELS school should put a crisis (emergency) plan in place and publish it. This plan may vary from school to school according to each school's needs, but it should follow the guidelines suggested earlier in this paper. All faculty members must be rehearsed and familiar with their school's plan.

Bullying, the most insidious, and as research suggests, prevalent form of school violence, must be continually addressed with the proper use of the Law and Gospel. The Gospel is the only true motivation for not bullying one another for "we love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). There are many programs from public and private agencies available to address bullying in school. Individual WELS schools may choose to use one of these programs. However, caution and good previewing is advised so that programs which contain humanistic motivation might be edited and adjusted. We have the privi-

lege and ability to use God's Word to change hearts. We must guard against losing or inadvertently overlooking this powerful tool.

In conclusion, it becomes clear that due to sin in this world, there will always be some form of violence in our schools at one time or another. However, God has blessed us with many safety tools and methods along with the wisdom and common sense to use them to give our students a reasonable measure of safety. More importantly, He has blessed us with his saving word, the most powerful and effective tool for changing sinful hearts. And finally, when times of trouble and violence overtake us, he comforts us through his word and reminds us, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt. 28:20). ❧

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Upcoming Alumni events

All MLC, DMLC, and NWC alumni and attendees are invited and encouraged to join us for the following events. More details for each can be obtained on the MLC website at the address below or by calling the alumni office at (877) MLC-1995 x 387.

www.mlc-wels.edu/home/alumni

Commencement Activities

May 15 Alumni Banquet	5:30 PM
Commencement Concert (gym)	7:30 PM
May 16 Commencement Service (gym)	10:00 AM
Call Service (gym)	2:30 PM

Grade Reporting: Are we making the grade?

Keith Wakeman

"School has come to be about the grades rather than the learning." (Conklin)

"*Many common grading practices…make it difficult for many youngsters to feel successful in school."* (Canady and Hotchkiss)

Admit it. We're all in this together. The grades we enter on our students' report cards are essentially the type that our teachers gave us. Likewise, their teachers before them. Oh, we may differ in our methods. We might hold fast to our own formula of test averages, class participation, weighting, work completion, rewards, penalties, and curves. Yet if our goal is to promote authentic, long-lasting student learning, it is possible that we're missing the mark. Regardless of the practices we use at report card time, no matter what we consider to be effective and "fair," perhaps it's time to grade ourselves as educators.

First, a healthy dose of humble pie. In my 34 years in and around the classroom, I have often fallen prey to a litany of misconceptions. I have caught myself (maybe you, too?) trying to catch my balance on these slippery slopes:

"Grading is essential for learning. Students simply won't perform without them."

"Grading is objective. Of course I'm fair!"

"Why change? Traditional grading is founded on years of substantive research!"

"Grades are the "rod" they need! Some day she'll thank me for that D+!"

Alas, we may be deceiving ourselves. Not only is it difficult to find much reliable evidence that A's, B's, and C's are helping children to learn, it's quite possible we have inadvertently been harming them while wanting to help them.

The seven elementary schools in our district conducted a two-year study of our conventional reporting system. Among the objectives of our introspection were a search for a more readable, informative tool for parents (never easy) and for more uniformity from classroom to classroom (harder still!), but ultimately the "anchor" of our research was the tenet that students deserve a more constructive and enduring way to learn and perform. Our journey took us through works of Guskey, of Wiggins and McTighe, and culminated in an all-district study of Ken O'Connor's book *How to Grade for Learning*. O'Connor does not offer The Answer, nor will I be so presumptive. He did, however, cause us to reflect deeply on our reporting priorities. I invite you to consider, as did we, the following "thinking points" from this author:

- It should be easier for students to see assessment as something that is done with them (to improve their learning) rather than something that is done to them (to find out what they don't know.)
- The primary purpose of classroom assessment must be to inform learning, not to sort and select or justify a grade.
- Authentic assessment has moved away from an emphasis on paper-and-pencil methods toward the use of a broader array of assessment methods with an emphasis on performance assessment.
- If grades are to serve learning, students must understand and be involved in the whole assessment process.

This article will not contain answers. I'm sorry to disappoint. Long before a school can draw conclusions and seek to improve its reporting methods, each of us as instructors and assessors must take that long look at what we do, how it's working, and how it could be measurably better. Instead of dueling with our respective theories, opinions, and answers, we must come to grips with some essential questions. Try these on for size:

Is my grading consistent?

I'm sure you've been there. As a teacher trying to devise an equitable system of setting up my grading scheme each year, I faced the daunting task of weighting, adding, and balancing a vast array of numbers and scores. I prepared for the tests, quizzes, projects, speeches, efforts, deadlines met or missed, and all the myriad of mismatched and incongruous ingredients soon to become entries in my grade book. I became lost in the formula. And if the number crunching and averaging seemed arbitrary to me, imagine the frustration of the students trying to monitor their own progress! Inconsistency in grading does not make us bad teachers; it's an inherent flaw. In each of our schools it is a reality, in fact, that a student can receive very different grades from the very same set of scores, depending on the teacher, the distribution of entries, and the grading method chosen! Even the most "scientific" averages, class norms, and bell curves falter if it truly is deep and enduring understanding that is our goal.

Are good grades evidence of effective learning?

Often, yes. Yet we've all had students who were capable of "playing the game." A's often go to those who can memorize, who can meet deadlines, and who raise their hand eagerly. Too often, however, the depth of thought and enduring grasp of concept in those "surface achievers" is inferior to others of lower grade points. Grades should reflect a student's performance according to a criterion-based set of goals or learning targets. They should continually show the level of mastery at which a student can sustain his skill at each learning standard. Our district's elementary schools have abandoned the

traditional A, B, C marks on report cards in favor of other letter notations. (B, D, and S denote "Beginning, Developing, and Secure" in each learning target. An E shows the ability to exceed the grade's learning objectives. N means "not assessed in this grading period" and I shows that there was insufficient evidence to apply a grade.) The hope is that this will bring a more objective learning environment, more clarity to the actual learner and less disparity from task to task and from teacher to teacher.

Does my grading match my teaching?

Step away from your books, worksheets, and syllabi. Does your instructional style reflect the questioning and the wonder that you ask of your students? Are your expectations for them transparent, understood, and shared or are they secretive and ambiguous? Do your students understand their own progress at any point in time and know how to set goals to improve their results? Do you praise the concept of "risk taking" then inadvertently penalize the inevitable mistakes when they dare to think along a new and creative path?

Am I grading on rote and recall more than deep understanding?

There's nothing wrong with drills and memorizing, if these are stepping stones to higher-order thinking. And what's easier than an assessment (multiple choice, fill in the blank, true/false, etc.) where students need only recycle what they've heard in class or read for homework? Those that can "play the game" get A's, and the rest do not. But if your professional striving craves for more, try this: make an honest mental list of those fundamental skills and understandings that you would like your students to leave your class with at the end of the grading period. Does the participatory and exploratory climate in the classroom foster and facilitate these skills? Do your report cards reflect a spectrum of formative assessments that show a student's ability to sustain her performance over time, and not just on a battery of book-generated quizzes?

Am I over-concerned with students' early efforts?

Few would disagree that we're looking for a slate of "end-products" in each student's learning. By the end of the semester or the school year we look for evidence that she has reached a certain level of confidence in each of the standards and benchmarks established for that subject or grade level. Do her early stumblings in September and October factor into an averaged grade with equal weight? Do we need to "count" all those early efforts at all? As the story goes, I would rather jump from a plane with the product of a parachute-packer who started poorly but reached flawless mastery by the end of the class, over his co-learner who did a "pretty good" job at packing parachutes all along, and who actually had the overall better "grade average"!

Are some of my grading criteria unrelated to actual learning?

There is no doubt that motivation and cooperation are desirable traits in our students, and can directly impact their success. However, these factors have a tendency to cloud our objective vision when they are stirred into the already-ambiguous mix of a letter grade. In spite of our desire to reward the sweetheart and punish the rascal, grades are to be pure measures of a student's achievement as linked to learning targets. The components of effort, participation, late work, attendance, and attitude can be included in a report card, but it should be clear that they are independent of the grading formula.

Does my grading system motivate my students to do better?

I spent over half of my teaching career answering 'yes'! Research clearly reveals the opposite. Grades can effectively encourage, redirect, and validate but they are not to be "weapons of control" (O'Connor). The sixth grader that has received three years of C's and D's has gotten the message loud and clear. Success is not his. Three more years of low grades will do nothing but confirm this; seldom will such a student see the grade as an incentive for improvement. (Ironically, just as much harm can be done when we give over-inflated grades! "Easy A's" can serve as idle praise, and do injustice do a student who moves to the next grade level or school where grading practices are less generous.)

Motivation at any age comes from honest engagement in a lesson, from exploration and discovery, from setting personal goals and meeting them. Letter grades are often no more than an artificial "carrot." What about the venerable GPA, and its "critical" role in college preparation? Interestingly, many college admissions offices are becoming wary of the grade point average and are seeking a more authentic profile of student potential. Goal portfolios, the willingness to take rigorous courses, and the ability to overcome adversity: these are the traits that indicate the promise of completing a college career. Too many "4.0s" do not survive even their freshman year at the university level!

Richard Stiggins recommends a shift from assessment of learning to assessment for learning. Formative assessment, and the marks we apply to it, should inform the way we teach and the direction each student should head for personal progress. Stiggins maintains that effective reporting should involve 1) clear purposes, 2) clear targets where the student has the central role in their pursuit, 3) breadth and accuracy of assessments which validate any given grade, and 4) effective communication to parents, and especially to the students. (For fun, try having your students conduct their own parent conferences! I have seen this effectively done as early as 2nd grade!)

"Grade-bashing" is not my objective. Schools and individual teachers may certainly choose to stay with a conventional grading design. My encouragement, however, is to reconsider how you

arrive at an "A, B, C" decision, what the grade is based on, and if your current practice is encouraging constructed learning toward accepted targets, or simply an echo of acquired information. Whether you're in the 5th or the 35th year of your teaching career, such reflection is fruitful, and just might alter not only your own reporting methods but your whole approach to instruction. Change is seldom easy, but the rewards may well justify the effort! ❧

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Upcoming Alumni events

Alumni Tour to Creation Museum, Petersburg, KY - June 15-19

Join Prof. Lyle Lange, Prof. Steve Thiesfeldt, and your fellow alumni on this fun, informative, and faith-building five-day venture to the new Creation Museum near Cincinnati, OH. Additional sights and activities in route include: Chicago's Magnificent Mile, Cincinnati Reds baseball at Great American Ballpark, Indiana's Amish country, and an Ohio River sunset dinner cruise. Our deluxe motorcoach will start its journey at MLC and offer convenient pick up points for guests along the highway 14, 90, or 94 corridor to Chicago. A great value at $349 quad, $399 triple, $449 double, or $599 single occupancy. Limited space is available so call now to reserve yours.

What Living Faith Looks Like (Part 3)

David Sellnow

This issue's commentary explores James 2:10-19:

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

Stumbling in one thing

We make a critical mistake if we think we can keep God's laws by focusing on each specific command. When James spoke of what would happen if someone were to keep the whole law, yet stumble at just one point (James 2:10), the implication is that such a track record is impossible. Keeping even one commandment is beyond our ability. In reality, we all stumble all over the place. One reason we keep stumbling is that we get caught up in the commands themselves, as if trying to follow a complicated manual for assembling a good life. We become careful accountants of the laws' details, wanting to make sure

Editor's note: Commentaries on James chapter two are being featured in this year's volume of *The Lutheran Educator*. Called workers are invited to use these pages and accompanying discussion questions as part of faculty or other church staff meetings throughout the year.

we do everything just right. In doing so, we miss the point. It's like trying to play basketball while looking at our hands on the ball. Are we holding it right? Are we shooting with the proper form? Are we applying the correct amount of spin? None of those details will help much if we never lift our eyes to look at the basket.

We can't follow God's will by eyeing our personal performance of each minute demand of the commandments. The ultimate goal is love. If we aim to love at all times, conforming to the laws' particulars will follow accordingly. As an Old Testament saying captured it, the Lord desires "mercy, not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). Any outward obedience we offer God is meaningless if it does not have love at its heart.

Without love, we have stumbled over the single greatest commandment God has given. Without love, even the highest religious acts are nothing more than noise and fuss—like banging gongs and clanging cymbals (1 Corinthians 13:1).

Living the law of love

When we think of the law as a set of rules and regulations, we find it binding and constricting. It threatens us. It limits our behavior.

When we understand God's law as essentially a single command—to love—we see it in a different light. And when we recognize that Christ has loved us first, we are liberated to live our lives in love. We live not slavishly, in fear of being punished for each misstep. Rather, we are eager to love as God has loved us. This is the target James set before us: "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom" (James 2:12).

We don't normally think of the law as giving freedom. We think of law saying, "Do this! Don't do that!" Such is our view of law before we have been brought to Christ. Apart from Christ, we were stuck in selfishness and sin. We could not serve God. We could not love our neighbor. But now, in Christ, we are new creations, no longer living merely for ourselves (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:15-17). We're no longer seeking to get even or get ahead or get back at other people. We are pleased to give mercy and kindness and forgiveness instead.

If the desire to show mercy is not in our hearts, we have slipped away from God. While it is true that we don't earn God's grace by our graciousness toward others, we can put ourselves outside of God's love if we are loveless. James warned, "Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful" (James 2:13).

Think of Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant. A man owed millions of dollars to a king, and the king cancelled his gigantic debt. Shortly thereafter, the same man wrung the neck of someone who owed him some small change. The king heard of this and had the man jailed and tortured mercilessly. Jesus commented: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:35).

Hearts that have truly been touched by God's love will love others.

Appreciation of how God has forgiven us inspires us to be forgiving toward our fellowman. Thus we pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." It's not that our mercy toward others earns God's mercy. Rather, his mercy moves our hearts to be merciful as he is. If we have lost the capacity to act mercifully, have we not lost our comprehension of the grace we ourselves received from God?

Mercy is over judgment

James added another remark about mercy: "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). This is an interesting expression. Literally it is saying, "Mercy boasts against judgment."

People are prone to boast against each other. Boasting is being judgmental—I think first of myself and believe others should fall in line behind me. A self-absorbed arrogance lurks behind judgmental attitudes.

Mercy boasts against judging. Mercy is bigger and better than judging. James echoed the perspective of Paul, who said that if you want to boast about something, boast in the cross of Jesus Christ (Galatians 6:14). Boast in the Lord who is true power and wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:31). Boast in the mercy God has shown to you, not in worldly trivialities about who is better than whom. Mercy is the great gift of God that saved us all from the most horrible judgment. Mercy is the motive we now have toward others in our world. We move beyond the petty judgments people typically make. We live by the motto that love conquers all. This is the triumph of mercy.

Faith must act

As we proceed through the second half of James' second chapter, we now find a more general commentary about the relationship between faith and actions.

It is a central Christian truth that we are made right with God through faith, not by keeping commandments (cf. Romans 3:28, Galatians 3:11, Ephesians 2:8,9). Yet it is also true that where faith exists, doing good is to be expected. "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? … Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:14,17).

Faith that generates no works isn't really faith. True faith always has actions flowing from it. For example, the thief on the cross next to Jesus had only a few moments of life as a believer. Yet he was moved to confess Christ aloud and rebuke another man's mockery. An elderly grandmother in a nursing home may not have ability or opportunity to do community service, but her heart regularly offers prayers from where she lies in bed.

Most of us are not confined by bodily frailty. None of us are being held down by nails through our hands or feet. There is so much good that we can be doing. Why is it that at times we seem so inactive in serving the Lord and loving our neighbor? Is there some sort of glue that has us stuck in our recliners in front of plasma-screen TVs?

James said faith "by itself"—without actions accompanying it—is dead. It no longer exists. That's because faith never exists by itself. Faith always acts. A man with faith would never say, "Look at me! I have no deeds!" He would be ashamed of his inaction. A person of faith is always seeking opportunities to put faith into practice. Having faith without works is like having fire without heat. It just doesn't happen.

Faith in action

James gave a specific example of how faith connects with works. Again we are challenged about our attitude toward the poor and are called to a greater love. "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" (James 2:15-16)

What do you do if you encounter someone who is destitute? That may be an awkward question. We seek to avoid such encounters. We build our homes in the suburbs, out of sight of urban poverty. We teach our children that there are certain parts of town you just don't frequent. We say this in the interest of safety. But are we inferring that the poor are inescapably criminal and utterly beyond hope? Might it also be that, underneath it all, we have an aversion to dealing with the poor?

James' example demonstrates how our aversion works. We are pious about it. We are willing to pray for the poor, to wish them well … but eager to send them on their way. We are reluctant to get our hands dirty and get into the ghettos and get involved. We say to the person who can't afford food or clothes, "God bless you, you poor dear! I hope you will be okay." What good is that? God puts needy persons in front of us for a reason. How will their needs be met if we don't respond to their needs?

In James' time, a common farewell was to say "Go in peace." It is similar to our "goodbye," which derived from the phrase, "God be with ye." Most of the time we speak expressions like "farewell" and "goodbye" as trifling slogans—indeed, how many of us recall their original meaning? We even say "God bless" as a parting word in a similarly empty way. We don't utter these words as true prayers, for that would lead to our personal involvement. We prefer to remain detached. To say, "I'll pray for you," is often a dodge to avoid doing something concrete. Yes, we should pray for the less fortunate, and prayer is powerful and effective (cf. James 5:16). But we also ought to be ready to be an answer to others' prayers, to be God's agents to bring mercy into their lives. "Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:18).

Let's look at the full picture. We have Christians in our congregations who could use assistance. There are also persons across town or in nearby cities whose need cries out to us in our affluence. And the whole world has grown closer within our reach in the centuries since James' time. If we ask ourselves, "Who is my neighbor?" we must include

the throngs of humanity crowded into impoverished regions all around the globe. When I was a child, my mother said I should eat my vegetables because starving children in China would be glad to have such food. (I suspect everybody's mother used some similar admonishment!) I don't recall, though, that we ever tried to send a care package to the starving in China or India or Africa or wherever. Maybe a plateful of one kid's green beans wouldn't have much global impact. But in our world today, we have access and ability, often through our own church's missionaries, to share shiploads of necessities with neighbors all over the world who are "without clothes and daily food" (James 2:15), or who need medical care or other basic humanitarian services. Do we think much about them? Do we do much to help them? James' powerful urging is: Do something! The world's poor are not to be viewed as a drain on the world's economy, but as opportunities for us to put faith into action.

Be liberal with your love

Some of you reading this might be thinking, "This writer sounds like a bleeding-heart liberal!" Well, I hope I am, and I hope you will be too. I'm not talking about political liberalism, but the kind of liberality that every Christian will want to espouse. Our hearts should go out to all those in need of spiritual guidance or physical assistance. Our gifts should flow freely, liberally, in order to bring needed benefits to them.

I fear that some of us have so adopted the doctrines of political conservatism that we've become unwilling to practice liberal Christian kindness, assisting those in need. A church member—a dear, dedicated lady—argued against giving aid to struggling families. Our congregation was providing them with vouchers to the community food bank. Bear in mind, we paid pennies per pound for the food, and our annual expense for this charitable effort was less than one percent of our congregational budget. It wasn't the amount of our donations that sparked this woman's objection. It was the principle of the matter. She was firmly convinced that helping the poor encouraged helplessness and dependency. This can sometimes be the case, but is not always so. The scenario James described is that of an individual who truly is in need of help. You can't tell him he should budget his income better; he has no income. You can't say he should work harder; he has no job and no prospects. The person James pictured is literally naked and absolutely lacking. He's got nothing. He's totally helpless. Will you help him … or will you pass by on the other side of the street?

In the United States, much of the burden of concern for the poor has been diverted into the hands of the government. If we as Christian people would see charity as our neighborly responsibility, would there be much need for federally orchestrated social programs? Sometimes the government has prompted churches toward "faith-based initiatives" by offering funding for

providing various benefits to communities. But do we really need prompting or incentives or kickbacks from civil authorities to get us to do what should flow freely from our faith? I do not fault churches for taking advantage of voucher programs and the like … but if all of us in all our churches were giving liberally, from the heart, would any ministries need to look anywhere else than to their brothers in Christ for the support that they need?

We have allowed ourselves to fall into similar attitudes globally. We see Third World inhabitants as problems for border patrol and international security. We fear them as threats to our jobs through outsourcing or we want them as markets for our products through exporting. We fail to remember that they are, first of all, people. They ought to be objects of our evangelistic concern and Christian compassion. If love for others—including strangers and foreigners—is not in our hearts, can we say the love of God is in us? "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. … For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:8,20).

Useless faith

"But! But! But …" we protest. We get defensive when told we are deficient in our deeds. "You're making it sound as though we need good deeds to be saved!" No. Christ alone saves you. But James is saying that if you are saved, you will be doing deeds. You will not be lacking in love. James rejected the argument that faith and deeds are on opposite ends of the religious spectrum: "But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do" (James 2:18).

It is not possible to be a person of faith and have no deeds to show for it. Likewise, no genuinely good works are done by persons who are not inspired by Christ through faith. Scripture mirrors James' point elsewhere, noting that even the most righteous acts we produce on our own are filth, no better than soiled, contaminated rags (Isaiah 64:6), explaining that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). The meditations of devout Buddhists don't grab God's attention, nor do the many bowed heads in Muslim mosques bring a friendly turn of God's countenance. Christless religions and Christless religious acts are meaningless, "for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

So there are no true deeds where there is no true faith. Likewise, there is no faith in the true God that does not produce godly deeds. Religion that has Christ at its core produces the only meaningful acts of religion, and it will always produce these—a flowering of activity that shows Christ to the world. Faith that does not manifest itself outwardly is useless as a witness to others. Such a faith is like a light smothered underneath a bowl (Luke 11:33).

Moreover, faith without deeds is useless as a hope of entry into heaven.

Faith that acts is the sort of faith God highlights when describing the day of judgment. Jesus' description of the separating of sheep from goats (Matthew 25) characterizes the heavenbound as those who did deeds of love in Christ for the least of their fellow human beings. Jesus summed it up succinctly on another occasion: "Those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned" (John 5:29). Such words from the mouth of Jesus may startle us who know so well the emphasis of John 3:16 – "Whoever believes … shall have eternal life." But Jesus' point is also James' emphasis. Useful faith, living faith, saving faith never exists as a thing confined to itself. It always is finding outward expression in deeds of love. When Jesus portrayed the judgment as an accounting of deeds, these deeds are simply evidence of faith, for they are born of faith, stemming from Christ. No other deeds count, and no other kind of faith is real.

Demonic belief

James vividly illustrated that only one kind of faith is valid. "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder" (James 2:19). Believing in God in a generic sort of way means having no more faith than does the devil. At least demons realize the gravity of knowing there is a God. Their hair stands on end (so to speak), because they are aware of God's great power and are at odds with his good will. When we live our lives at odds with God's will, do we even think about it? Do we even care? At the very least, a person who knows God ought to be terrified of God's wrath.

Scripture repeatedly warns about lackadaisical faith. Christ said to a wealthy, contented congregation: "You are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!" (Revelation 3:15). Blasé believers are deeply distasteful to God, barely even warm enough still to be called believers. Any further acclimating of ourselves to the world's bland temperature, and we are spit to God. He wants no part of such lukewarmness (cf. Revelation 3:16).

Trusting faith

Faith extends beyond mere knowledge. It starts with knowledge but entails much more. Faith assents to the truth of what God says. Demons don't do that—they revolt against God's truth and goodness. We are prone to that same rebellious instinct. We come across scripture statements that challenge how we think and live, and we devilishly dispute, "Did God really say that? Did he really mean that?" Lord, we believe; help us overcome our unbelief!

Faith also consists in trusting God, relying on all his promises. (Demons won't do that. Their reaction to God is the opposite of trust—they are in constant rebellion against him.) Trust is a matter of the heart that translates into a way of life. If I know God is all-powerful and full of love, and I acknowledge that personally—believing his power pro-

tects me and he infinitely loves me—then I will trust that he'll never leave me and will always lead me in the right direction. And I go that direction—that is part of trust too!

Think of a child's relationship to her mother. She knows who her mother is. She listens to what Mother says, believes Mother tells the truth, models herself after her mother's pattern. And if Mother puts her on a bike or pushes her in a swing, the little girl relies on her mother's care and relishes the activities they share. Now imagine a mother telling her toddler, "Let's go to the park," and the youngster replying, "That's okay. I know you're my mother and I've seen the park before. I think I'll just sit here on the floor." We would not call that a healthy mother-daughter relationship (and not for fault of the mother).

Faith in God as our Father and Jesus as our Brother likewise is a matter of relationship and living in that relationship. Children of God will be eager to do good deeds and practice active kindness as much as little girls and boys love to play and interact with their parents. Acting in faith is part of our intrinsic character as God's children. So-called faith that sits on its hands and avoids activity with God is not what the Scriptures mean by faith.

Faith is not merely an intellectual affair. If you can correctly state Christian doctrine but that doctrine has no burning impact on your heart or life, then what you are calling faith is something less than faith. Faith not only knows, it affirms its agreement with God and acts on its trust in God. This is the sort of faith James meant when he said, "I will show you my faith by what I do" (James 2:18).

Next time: Two case studies concerning faith expressing itself in actions.

Talk about it

Use the following discussion starters within your school faculty or with other church staff.

- In our schools, do we ever get too focused on making sure children conform to school rules and behavioral codes – thus teaching them to measure their spirituality according to the law? Or are we leading the children to become followers of Jesus and live lives of love, as Christ loved us (cf. Ephesians 5:2)? Are the two approaches incompatible with one another?
- Are we as Christians deeply forgiving of our brothers and sisters in our own families? Of our colleagues in gospel ministry? Of our fellow members in the congregation? Of our neighbors in the community?
- Agree or disagree: Whenever I am unforgiving toward my neighbor, it is because I have forgotten or have chosen to ignore how great a debt God has forgiven toward me. (Cf. Matthew 18:21-35.)
- Are there ways in which we become boastful or judgmental as individual Christians? As called workers? As congregations? As a synod?
- What efforts are being made at pre-

sent by your congregation or school to minister to the poor? Brainstorm a bit – what further initiatives could you undertake to offer compassion and charitable assistance to the needy?

- Agree or disagree: Giving handouts to the poor is counterproductive because it trains them to depend on handouts rather than to become self-reliant individuals.
- Enlightenment era thinker Pierre Bayle said, "Morals and religion, far from being inseparable, are completely independent of each other. A man can be moral without being religious. There is nothing more extraordinary about an atheist living a virtuous life than there is about a Christian leading a wicked one." What did Bayle have right? What is he missing?
- Agree or disagree: Lackadaisical faith is just as detestable to God as is rank unbelief.
- In what ways is your faith expressing itself in deeds right now? Don't think only of obvious, noticeable acts, but also the small daily ways in which faith shows itself. For this question, have each member of the group describe ways he sees faith being evidenced by one of the other persons in the group!
- What factors impede you from being vibrantly active in living your faith? What can be done to remove such impediments? ❧

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Upcoming Alumni events

Reunion Weekend, MLC Campus, New Ulm, MN – July 24-26

Don't miss this year's alumni reunion weekend. Highlights include… a firsthand look at MLC today (including new chapel construction); reuniting with classmates, friends, and current and former faculty; alumni college classes; community tours; an evening banquet; affordable accommodations, food, and child care.

Regardless of your age, we're planning activities with you in mind.

Classes celebrating a five year incremental anniversary year are strongly encouraged to join us, but all alumni are welcome to attend.

Homecoming '09…October 10 – Save the Date!

Profiles of Ministry: Minister of Education

Joshua M. Roth

What is a Minister of Education?

When you hear the title, "Minister of Education," thoughts of teachers and principals might come to your mind. Or maybe you think of someone who oversees the Sunday school and VBS programs and teaches public school confirmation classes and youth Bible studies. Perhaps instead of these examples you think of someone who teaches adult and family Bible studies. Since we in our congregations strive to have every member growing in and through the Word of God, there are many possibilities for utilizing a minister of education; there is no "one-size fits all."

When I was assigned to Petra Lutheran Church after graduating from MLC in 2002, my position was described as half-time upper-grade teacher, principal, and staff minister. While at the time I couldn't completely grasp what that meant, I already had begun to formulate an idea of just what that kind of a position entailed. I would soon find that flexibility is a key ingredient in staff ministry.

The staff ministry position at Petra is unique due to the fact that it is intertwined with the Lutheran elementary school. Petra Lutheran is a small school that serves students in Preschool through 8th grade in a multi-grade setting. As the main upper-grade teacher and administrator of the school, much of my time is spent with teaching, administration, spiritual and professional leadership, meeting with members about sending their children to the school, and strengthening the overall school ministry. This also includes trying to get the school's name and good reputation out into the community with the hopes of getting more students from the community to come to our school. This in itself can be very time-consuming, but the congregation, in calling a staff minister, wanted to strengthen other areas of ministry as well.

In addition to the school, Petra Lutheran Church has many other ways through which they carry out Christian education. To get an idea of the overall Christian education in the congregation, it is beneficial to look at the Petra Board of Education. There are three major areas that this group oversees: the Lutheran elementary school, the Sunday school, and the youth group. In

the committee's purpose statement there is a line that reads, "It shall meet regularly to discuss all matters related to the Christian Day School (Lutheran Elementary School) and to promote any and all educational agencies which the congregation may maintain." This has been another area of focus for me as minister of education.

Working with the youth group has been a big part of my ministry. This involves Sunday morning Bible class, coordinating and participating in monthly fellowship outings, coordinating service projects for the youth (both as individuals and as a group), and encouraging more participation in all youth events.

The summer VBS program at Petra, which usually runs toward the end of July or early August, typically has between 70 and 80 children in attendance. It is truly a blessing to get 30 or more children from the community in addition to the students in your own congregation! As minister of education, I have been the VBS coordinator, and it has really turned out to be a great way for members of the congregation, young and old, to gather together in the Word! It is also an event where many members, especially the youth of the congregation, serve their Lord by helping and teaching at VBS.

Two other areas of education that I have worked with as a staff minister are public school Catechism instruction, and campus ministry Bible studies on the campus of St. Cloud State University. I teach the 5th and 6th grade level of Catechism, and the pastor teaches the 7th and 8th grade level. I assist with some of the administration of the campus ministry and I also fill in for the pastor during busy times of the year, such as lent, when he is unable to be present.

The "job description" for a staff minister can involve so many different things from congregation to congregation. There is great opportunity for individuals to use their God-given gifts and abilities in the congregation that calls them. In my time at Petra, I have had the privilege of presenting sermons during pastoral vacancies, visiting the sick in the hospital, playing the organ on a regular rotation, and helping to accompany and sing in the choir. Praise the Lord for the ability and opportunity to serve!

What is a minister of education? It depends. It depends on the unique gifts and abilities of the staff minister. It depends on each congregation and the unique ministry opportunities that the Lord has given to it. And it depends on how the congregation wants to go about carrying out the Lord's work. Perhaps you see a need for a minister of education in your congregation…! ❧

Joshua Roth is a staff minister at Petra Lutheran Church, Sauk Rapids, MN.

Profiles of Ministry: Deaconess

Marilyn Miller

For many years I sat in the worship services and Bible classes hearing the call to serve God with my time, my talents, my treasures, and with every part of my life. When I was choosing a career some years back, being a called worker meant being a pastor or a teacher. Becoming a pastor was ruled out by nature, and I'm not known for my talents as a classroom teacher. Where did I fit in? I had a pastor tell me that the church needed committed lay people as much as it needed called workers. This satisfied me somewhat, so I went about building a career in the business world.

Decades passed. God blessed me with a very successful career. He also gave me many wonderful opportunities to serve him in my local congregation as well as in other organizations. But I still heard that nagging voice and I wanted somehow to do more. Just as I personally had changed and matured over the years, so had the opportunities for formal service in the church taken on a new look. In the spring of 2005 I decided to do something drastic—I quite my job. I didn't know it at the time, but God was finally answering that prayer.

He very quickly led me to the staff ministers' certification program at Martin Luther College in New Ulm, MN. I was thrilled to sit in the classrooms, studying the Word of God and learning the other skills that I would need as a staff minister. I had already learned many of those skills in the business world, but the approach and the motivation is so very different in the church. After two semesters on campus I found myself back in my home congregation in Houston, TX, doing a semester of internship. A whirlwind sixteen months after being my training, my home congregation extended a call, asking me to serve as their deaconess.

Since January, 2007, I have served as a deaconess at Abiding Word Lutheran Church in Houston, TX. Abiding Word is a 38 year old congregation in the northern suburbs of Houston and it has about 600 members. They have 80 students in their K-8 Lutheran elementary school and 45 children in preschool, ages 18 months to pre-K. It is being served by two pastors and a deaconess, 5.5 called teachers, a called preschool director and about a dozen preschool workers. God has greatly blessed Abiding Word with continued growth and they plan to add two more called

workers beginning with the fall semester.

My call is divided into two major areas: facilitator of ministry and organization /administration. The responsibilities in the call are quite broad, but they fit my talents and interests very well. This is one of the wonderful benefits of calling a staff minister: the call can be structured to fit the unique gifts of the worker.

The facilitator of ministries category covers three major areas of responsibility: evangelism / outreach, special ministries and women's ministries. Of primary importance to a congregation is organizing and maintaining prospect files and calling on prospects and visitors. Little things like sending a welcome card and making a personal call to those who visit a worship service can make a significant impression on those looking for a church home. A bi-monthly newsletter is used to maintain regular contact with the prospects. We also reach out to unchurched school and preschool families. Each week the ministry staff assigns the member and prospect calls that need to be made, thus making it possible to sit face to face to share God's Word with a significant number of individuals.

Special ministries responsibilities include the development of dependency / support groups, managing our needy assistance program, family ministry and also hospital and shut-in visitation. One of our success stories is the formation of a caregivers' Bible study that has expanded into a wonderful support and prayer group. A number of the women seeking counseling have commented that they very much appreciate being able to share their concerns and get spiritual advice from a woman. Even though they agree that the pastor would give them excellent counseling, some feel more comfortable

Responsibilities Outlined in Call

1. Facilitator of Ministry
   - Evangelism and Outreach
     - Prospect file and calls
     - Evangelism calendar
   - Special Ministries
     - Dependency groups
     - Needy assistance
     - Family ministries
     - Visitation
   - Women's Ministries
     - Bible classes and women's retreat
     - Advisor to women's ministries
     - Leadership training
     - Counseling
2. Organization/Administration
   - Church Business Manager
     - Board/Council handbooks
     - Job descriptions
     - Staff policies
     - Wage/salary/benefit management
   - Technology Officer
     - Computer server administrator
     - Website

talking with another woman.

The women's ministry at Abiding Word is very large and very active. A few of their many programs include women's Bible studies, an annual women's retreat, the new member assimilation activities, assistance for needy members in the form of food and visitation, altar guild, regular contact with mission families, and prayer meetings. They have more than thirty different active programs. The deaconess is the advisor to the women's ministry, prepares the Bible study and devotion material, trains other women to lead Bible studies, provides leadership training, and is a coach and advisor to the women's leaders.

The second major area of my call is organization and administration, which is divided into two major activities: church business manager and technology officer.

The church business manager to-do list is extensive because very little had been done in this area. Initial focus was on writing a staff policy manual and now writing board / council handbooks and job descriptions. Once completed, these handbooks should make the council and boards operate more efficiently and more consistently. It is expected that the learning curve for new members will be significantly reduced. Documenting the highly technical and precise procedures for some positions, such as treasurer and financial secretary, will be invaluable as new men take over these roles. As the human resources contact, there are wages, benefits and salaries to administer and budget.

For a creative break in the day, the website and electronic sign on the front lawn are always in need of updating and programming. Not only do these provide valuable communication to our members, they are also our image to the world.

My call is likely more inclusive than that of many staff ministers. However, it was designed to meet the expanding needs of the congregation as well as my unique gifts and it works well for us. Previously, some of the things that fill my day were being done by the pastor, some were being done to a limited degree by volunteers, and many were needs not being addressed at all.

Staff ministry provides a way for many of us with skills and desires other than preaching and teaching to serve the Kingdom on a fulltime basis. At the same time, it provides a trained resource to address the many changing needs of our congregations as they reach out to a changing world. ❧

Marilyn Miller is a certified staff minister who is serving as a deaconess at Abiding Word Lutheran Church in Houston, TX.

Seeking Your Comments

Martin Luther College invites comments from the public in preparation for its regular evaluation by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

MLC is fully accredited by the commission. A commission evaluation team will visit the college March 30-April 1, 2009, to review its ongoing ability to meet the commission's criteria for accreditation.

The public is invited to submit comments regarding the college. Comments should address substantive matters related to the quality of the institution and its academic programs. Comments must be in writing and signed. Comments cannot be treated as confidential. Please send your comments by February 28, 2009, to

Public Comment on Martin Luther College
The Higher Learning Commission
30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400
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David Wendler, Vice President for Academics

THE LUTHERAN EDUCATOR